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*Simon and the
Birthday Wish*

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Chapter 1

The Birthday Party

SIMON THWAITE was sitting with his Daddy in the kitchen one Sunday afternoon when there was a knock at the door. “Go and see who that is, Simon,” said Daddy.

When Simon opened the door, he saw his best friend Yasmin Campbell, along with her Mummy and Daddy.

“Happy Birthday, Simon,” Yasmin said. She gave him a large blue envelope that she’d been hiding behind her back.

Simon smiled and thanked her. He was seven today, finally. He was the youngest in his class at school, and was tired of the other children teasing him about being shorter than everyone else.

Inside the envelope was a card with characters from Simon’s favourite cartoon, *Planet Patrol*, all wishing him an out-of-this-world birthday.

Daddy came out of the kitchen and greeted Yasmin and her parents. “Come in,” he said.

They followed Daddy into the kitchen. While Simon had been at the door, Daddy had brought out a big birthday cake that he’d hidden in a cupboard. Everyone sang *Happy Birthday*, then Simon took a deep breath and blew out all the candles on the cake.

“Make a wish,” said Yasmin’s Daddy.

“Don’t tell anyone what it is,” Simon’s Daddy added.

What to wish for? Simon wondered. After some thought, he wished that Daddy could spend more time with him.

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Yasmin's Mummy cut the cake, leaving enough for anyone who wanted a second slice to have one. Daddy took care of the drinks—fizzy pop for the children, tea for the grown-ups.

The cake was delicious, with strawberry-flavoured icing on top and plenty of strawberry jam in the middle. Simon ate his slice as slowly as he could, but it still seemed to be finished too soon. Daddy cut some more slices for Simon, Yasmin and himself. Yasmin's parents didn't want another, even after Daddy asked them twice.

After Simon and Yasmin had eaten their second slices, Daddy told them to go and wash their hands. They did, and when they came back from the bathroom, the cups, plates and leftover cake had been cleared away. In their place were two more birthday cards and two wrapped-up presents.

One of the cards was from Daddy, and the other was from Joan, Simon's big sister, who was away at university. That one had a book token for ten pounds in it.

"Now you can open your presents," said Daddy.

Simon made a show of deciding which one to open first. One was small and oblong, wrapped in paper with trains on. The other was larger and odd-shaped, in left-over Christmas wrapping paper. He picked the small one, which was from Yasmin and her parents. It was a Captain Jones action figure from *Planet Patrol*. According to the box, it came with the Captain's Rocket Pack and a Proton Pistol, which was the weapon he used for zapping enemies.

"This is really cool," said Simon. "Thank you." He held up the figure and pointed it at Yasmin. Doing his best to imitate the Captain's voice, he said, "Activating scanners. Hostile alien life form detected. Open fire!"

The grown-ups laughed. Yasmin gave him a scowl that told him she'd get him back later.

Simon picked up the present from Daddy and tried to guess what it was. He pressed it, finding it soft. He shook it. It didn't rattle. He looked for gaps in the wrapping, but couldn't see any. What could it be? He didn't think any of the action figures from *Planet Patrol* were this shape. He tore off the wrapping paper.



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Inside was a brown teddy bear with one eye missing and some fur gone from the top of his head.

“Oh,” said Simon.

“Do you like it?” Daddy asked.

Simon knew you were supposed to answer a question like that with, “Yes,” so he did. But really—a teddy bear? Not even a new one? What was Daddy thinking?

Daddy’s phone rang. Daddy answered it and spoke quietly. Simon heard him say, “But it’s my son’s birthday,” before he went quiet again. He ended the call and told everyone, “I need to go into work for a couple of hours.”

“I thought you didn’t work on Sundays,” Yasmin’s Daddy said.

“Normally I don’t,” said Daddy, “but a few people have called in sick, and a big delivery’s just come in.” Daddy worked in a nearby supermarket, moving things from the warehouse at the back onto the shelves for customers to buy. Simon had wondered whether it would be simpler to let the customers go around the warehouse, but then Daddy wouldn’t have a job.

“So is the party over?” Simon asked. It had barely started.

Before Daddy could answer, Yasmin’s Mummy said, “We’ll mind him until you come back.”

“Thank you,” said Daddy, looking happier than Simon had seen him for a while. To Simon, he said, “You be good, now.”

“Yes Daddy,” said Simon.

Yasmin lived in the same block of flats as Simon, three doors down. Yasmin’s Mummy gave them some orange juice and biscuits, then Yasmin and Simon went to play in Yasmin’s room. It was the same size as Simon’s, but looked smaller, because of all the furniture and toys.

“We can play *Planet Patrol* now,” Yasmin said.

“With only one character?” said Simon.

She picked up a doll with a big head and long blonde hair. “Trudy can be what’s-her-name—Captain Jones’ girlfriend.”

Simon scowled. “Doctor Alex is *not* Captain Jones’ girlfriend.”

Yasmin raised her eyebrows. "You must be watching a different *Planet Patrol* from me, then."

They sat on Yasmin's bed and started making up a story. Five minutes into it, Yasmin asked, "What about Teddy?"

"There aren't any teddy bears in *Planet Patrol*," said Simon.

"How do you know?" Yasmin asked. "Just because you've never seen one, doesn't mean there aren't. It's a big ol' universe out there." That was something Captain Jones said whenever he met a particularly weird kind of alien for the first time.

Simon sighed. "I suppose he can be some new alien they've never seen before. Or a giant robot."

"Is he a good guy or a bad guy?" said Yasmin.

"Could one of yours be a bad guy?" Simon asked.

Yasmin shook her head. Simon knew she didn't like any of her toys being the enemy, as they were more likely to get bashed about.

Simon picked up the teddy and studied him. He noticed now that some of the stitches around his shoulder were loose. "I'm sorry Teddy, but it looks like you're the villain. I hope you're good at doing evil laughter."

"You can't call him 'Teddy,'" said Yasmin.

"Why not?"

"It's what he is, not his name. It'd be like calling Trudy 'Doll.' Or you 'Boy.'"

Simon wasn't keen on giving a name to a toy he hadn't wanted, so he said the first thing that came into his head. "Zac."

Yasmin sniggered. "The sheriff's horse in *Cowboy Tales*?"

Simon had completely forgotten about that uncool old show since he started watching *Planet Patrol*. On the other hand, this was an uncool old teddy bear, so maybe the name fit...

"Zac," he said firmly.

"Whatever," said Yasmin, not wanting to argue.

They carried on the story, bringing Zac into it as a giant bear-shaped alien with lasers for eyes who'd invaded a space station and was eating all its food. The good guys defeated him when Doctor Alex noticed he hadn't eaten some left-over birthday cake and worked out he must be allergic to it. Captain Jones

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used his rocket pack to fly up to the alien and lob the birthday cake into his mouth. He screamed and thrashed about for a bit, then melted.

“Melted?” said Yasmin.

“Why not?” said Simon. “He’s an alien. Who says he can’t have a weird way of dying?”

Simon’s Daddy knocked on the bedroom door. “Time to go home, son.”

Simon had lost track of what time it was—he’d been there for hours. He thanked Yasmin and her parents for the present. Daddy thanked them for looking after Simon at such short notice, then Simon and Daddy went home.

Inside the front door, Daddy yawned and said, “I’m going to have a bath, then I think I’ll go to bed. Do you want to watch a DVD?”

“OK,” Simon replied.

“Finish the pop if you like—it’ll only be flat tomorrow.”

After Daddy had gone into the bathroom, Simon went to the kitchen. He filled a glass with what was left of the pop and took it to the living room. As he watched the DVD, he drank the pop a sip at a time, not wanting any of it to come out of his nose if he laughed.

Halfway through the DVD, he paused it. He hadn’t laughed once.

What was wrong? It was his birthday. Birthdays were supposed to be happy. There was even a song about it. Why wasn’t he happy?

His big sister Joan could probably answer that. She was the clever one of the family. But she wasn’t due back from university for another week or two. Simon thought about phoning her, but Daddy was always grumbling about how expensive that was.

Simon decided to go to bed instead of staying up and feeling sorry for himself. He brushed his teeth and changed into his pyjamas. Maybe he’d have a nice dream, he thought as he lay down and turned off his bedside light.

Chapter 2

The Night-Time Visitor

SIMON WOKE UP SLOWLY. It was still dark. Someone was whispering his name, right next to his ear. He rolled over, reaching for the bedside light. He froze as his arm brushed against something that hadn't been there when he fell asleep.

"Turn it on," the voice said. "We may as well get the surprise over with." The voice sounded muffled, like the bad guys in *Cowboy Tales* who had neckerchiefs over their mouths.

Simon's hand found the light switch and flicked it on.

On the pillow lay the tatty old teddy bear that Daddy had bought for Simon's birthday. Simon heaved a sigh of relief, wanting to kick himself for being so scared. He didn't remember putting the teddy next to him, though maybe Daddy had—

"Good evening, Simon," the bear said, and raised his arm.

Simon screamed and tried to push through the wall behind him.

"Oh dear," said the bear. He put his paws over his ears, and Simon's scream stopped. Simon's mouth still moved, but no sound came out.

"That's better," said the bear, lowering his arms. "I won't hurt you. In fact, I'm obliged to help you."

Simon stopped scrabbling and stared at the bear. The bear stared back with his one unblinking eye.

"Yes, that's right," the bear said. "You brought me to life, so I'm in your debt." His mouth didn't open when he spoke, but the line of thread across it wriggled up and down. Apart from

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his voice being muffled through cloth, he sounded like a butler in one of the dramas that Joan liked to watch.

Simon shook his head. How could he have brought a teddy bear to life without even realising it? He must be dreaming.

"You're not dreaming," the bear said.

How could the bear know he'd just thought that?

"It's the first thing every child thinks when they meet me," the bear said. "You could pinch yourself. That convinces most people that I'm real. I'd do it for you, but..." He raised his stubby paws. "No fingers."

Not taking his eyes off the bear, Simon pinched the inside of his forearm. It hurt. So this was real.

"Good," said the bear. "Now, I'll give you your voice back, as long as you promise not to scream. Will you promise me that?"

Again, Simon nodded.

The bear waved his arm, and Simon's voice returned. A dozen questions tried to ask themselves at the same time. A stream of half-formed words came from his mouth.

"Oh dear," said the bear. "Let me answer the questions that children usually have at this stage." He dipped his head and seemed to think for a moment. "I am a magical teddy bear. You brought me to life because my power derives from the imagination of children. You played a game with me, improvising a story and giving me a role in it, thus bringing me to life. You have an unusually vivid imagination, I must say. Not many children can bring me to life on the first day they own me. And because you gave me life and power, I consider myself in your debt. I will use my power to help you until the debt is paid."

"Magical power?" said Simon. "Like... like... you can grant wishes?"

"Wishes are more genie territory," the bear said. "You have to be very careful with them. A genie will always look for a way to give you what you asked for without giving you what you wanted. I'm more..." He shrugged. "Flexible."

Simon was beginning to feel foolish hunched against the wall, so he stood up and walked to the chair at the other side of the room. The bear turned on his stubby legs to keep his eye on



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Simon.

“What’s your name?” Simon asked.

“Zac,” said the bear.

“That’s just what I called you. What’s your real name?”

“You called me Zac,” said the bear, “so while I’m in your debt, that *is* my name. A wise choice, if I may say so. The name of a loyal, honest and reliable friend.”

Simon frowned. “I named you after a horse in a cartoon series.”

“I am not certain as to what a ‘cartoon series’ is,” said Zac, “but I could tell you were thinking of the animal’s nature when you chose the name.”

“You can read my mind?” said Simon.

“Not precisely,” said Zac. “It’s more like...” He rubbed the top of his head, in the exact spot where the fur was missing. Simon sniggered. Zac stopped rubbing and glared at Simon, his mouth a straight line. “Going bald is no laughing matter for a teddy bear, young man. I can’t read your mind, but I can see your emotions and intents. You still don’t quite believe that all this is real. Let’s see...” He hopped off the pillow and walked to the edge of the bed. He looked around the floor. “That’ll do.”

Zac pointed, and Simon’s Captain Jones action figure lifted off the floor, as if his Rocket Pack had started working. He flew across the room towards Simon, who caught him. He felt warm, as if the Rocket Pack really had been moving him.

“Wow,” said Simon.

“Now you believe,” said Zac.

Simon did. He really did.

“It’s funny, though, how a sophisticated piece of magic like voice borrowing hardly moves you, but a simple bit of kinetic manipulation convinces you. Still, seeing is believing, as someone said. Now, before I did that, there was another thing in your mind—stronger than curiosity and scepticism.”

“What was it?” said Simon.

“You wanted something. Very, very badly. I think it’s time we discussed what I can do for you.”

There was only one thing Simon could honestly say he wanted

very, very badly. Until this evening, he would've said it was impossible... but now he was having a conversation with a magical teddy bear. He took a deep breath.

"I want my Mummy," he said.

"Oh," said Zac. After a few seconds, he added, "I should have guessed. And, er, why do you want her?"

Simon looked at the floor. The answer to that was something he managed to avoid thinking about, most of the time. Maybe if he said it quickly, it wouldn't hurt as much.

"She died when I was little."

"Oh dear," said Zac. "I'm very sorry to hear that, Simon, but... I'm afraid there's nothing I can do about it."

Simon stared at him. "But you can do magic."

Zac made a noise that might have been an embarrassed cough. "I can, but even magic has its limits."

Simon's eyes stung, and a lump formed in his throat. He always felt like that when he thought about Mummy. He shouldn't have said anything.

"Normally I'd suggest a hug," said Zac, "but we hardly know one another."

"Leave me alone," Simon snapped. He got back into bed and turned the light off, then rolled over to face the wall. He felt Zac's paw on the back of his neck. Tears rolled over his nose and down his cheek and soaked into the pillow. A sob heaved through him.

"Simon," said Zac. "I'm sorry about your Mummy. But you know your Daddy loves you very much, don't you?"

"Go away," Simon mumbled.

Zac didn't speak again before Simon fell asleep.

Chapter 3

The New Teacher

SIMON'S ALARM CLOCK woke him at seven o'clock on Monday morning. There was no sign of Zac. The conversation with him must've been a dream. Everybody knew teddy bears didn't come to life in the middle of the night.

As Simon walked to the door of his room, his foot clipped his new Captain Jones action figure. He'd left that on the other side of the room... hadn't he?

Simon washed and dressed, then had breakfast with Daddy. They called at Yasmin's flat, and Daddy walked with Simon and Yasmin to school.

Yasmin was excited about something, and kept talking, but Simon wasn't really listening. He was still thinking about Zac, and what he ought to wish for if it hadn't been a dream.

"Bye, Simon. Bye, Yasmin," said Daddy.

Simon looked up, realising they'd reached the school gate. "Bye, Daddy," he said. He turned to see Daddy already halfway across the road.

Yasmin pouted and said, "I *said*, what do you think of my new story for Captain Jones and Zac?"

"Umm..." said Simon, feeling his ears heat up.

They walked into the playground, where most of their classmates were already playing. "Honestly, Simon, were you listening to anything I said on the way here? You're just like my Daddy."

They sat on a bench at the edge of the playground. Simon



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wondered whether to tell her what had happened with Zac. But she'd never believe him.

A shadow fell across them. Simon looked up to see Derek Hanson standing in front of him. Simon's heart sank. Derek was the class bully, who was bigger than everyone else in Simon's class. He had three children with him, two boys and a girl. Their job was to keep a lookout for any teachers, so that Derek could pretend to be behaving himself.

"Give me your lunch money, Simon," Derek said.

"I haven't got any," Simon said, his voice shaking. "You know I never have any." He curled up, afraid of being kicked or worse.

"Leave him alone," Yasmin said.

"You stay out of this," Derek told her. He grabbed Simon's collar and dragged him to his feet. Simon nearly fainted from the stink of Derek's breath. "I know you've got money, because yesterday was your birthday."

"H-h-how do you know th-that?" Simon stammered.

Derek grinned like an alligator. "My dad told me, last night your dad tried to get off going into work because he'd rather be with you. I guess losers like to hang out together." His friends laughed.

Derek's Daddy was a boss at the supermarket where Simon's Daddy worked, and was just as much of a bully as his son.

Simon's eyes stung. He told himself he mustn't cry, especially not in front of Derek. "I promise, I-I haven't got any money."

Derek grunted and took a step back from Simon. To his friends, he said, "Turn him upside down and shake him. Let's see what falls out."

Simon looked for somewhere to run, but with the bench behind him, and Derek and his friends surrounding him, he was trapped. A tear trickled down his cheek.

Derek's friends advanced on Simon, but before they reached him, Derek suddenly flew backwards and landed in a heap on the ground, several feet away.

A tall lady in a long black overcoat and wide-brimmed black hat stood beside Derek. Simon had never seen her before. She looked down at Derek as though he was a mess that someone had

forgotten to clean up. Derek's friends stood as still as statues.

Derek glared at the lady. "You can't do that," he said.

"I already did," the lady replied. "Stand up." She had a foreign accent that Simon didn't recognise.

Derek got to his feet, tugging his clothes back into place as though he was angry with them for daring to become untidy.

"What's your name, young man?" the lady asked Derek.

"Derek Hanson, Miss."

"And you?" she asked Simon.

"Simon Thwaite, Miss."

"Now, Derek," said the lady, "would you care to explain what you were doing to your classmate just now?"

"I didn't do nothing," Derek said, shifting from one foot to the other. "I was just having a friendly chat." He gave Simon a hopeful look. "Wasn't I?"

The lady glanced at Simon. Her eyes were a vivid blue, even under the shadow of her hat, and Simon got the impression that she'd know if he lied. But if he told the truth, then when she was gone, Derek would make his life more miserable than it was already. So he said nothing.

The lady turned back to Derek. "So, young man, do you deny that you told your friends to turn Simon upside down and shake him to see what fell out?"

Derek's mouth opened and closed several times, like a goldfish, but no sound came out.

"I'll take that as a 'yes,'" the lady said. "Who is your class teacher?"

Derek was still too stunned to say anything, so Simon said, "Miss Montgomery, Miss. We're all in the same class."

"Thank you, Simon. I will consult with Miss Montgomery and devise a suitable punishment."

At the mention of punishment, Derek recovered. "You can't talk to me like that! I know my rights—this is abuse! I'll tell the police! I'll tell my dad!"

The lady shook her head. "Derek," she murmured. "Let me explain something to you." She bent down and whispered in his ear. His eyes widened in fear, and his body went rigid. Simon

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expected him to run away, but then his face became slack, as though he'd fallen asleep standing up. He blinked a few times and shook his head, then wandered off, seemingly unaware of the lady. His friends followed him. None of them seemed to notice the lady either.

The lady crouched in front of Simon and smiled. There was something not quite right about her expression, as though she'd read about smiles in a book, but had never actually seen one.

"I'm sorry about that, Simon," the lady said. "They should leave you alone now, at least for the rest of the day."

"What did you say to him, Miss?" Yasmin asked.

"If I told you, the same thing would happen to you as happened to them." She stood up straight. "It was nice to make your acquaintance, children. I'm sure we'll have the chance to get to know one another better quite soon." She turned and walked away. The heels of her shoes made a loud clicking on the tarmac, and Simon wondered why nobody had heard her approach.

"Who on Earth is she?" Yasmin whispered. She looked much more frightened than she had when Derek had been trying to steal Simon's money.

"Beats me," Simon replied.

The bell rang for the start of school, and the children all went into their classrooms.

Chapter 4

The English Lesson

SIMON'S TEACHER, Miss Montgomery, was a small lady with big frizzy blonde hair that made her look like a lion—and like a lion, she could roar when the children weren't behaving themselves. She took the register to make sure all her pupils were present, then told them to hand in their homework sheets.

Simon opened his bag to find his homework and screamed. Inside the bag was Zac!

"Simon?" said Miss Montgomery. "Is everything all right?"

Simon's heart hammered. Everybody was looking at him as though he'd turned purple.

"Simon?" Miss Montgomery repeated.

"S-sorry Miss," he stammered. "I just—just found something I'd been looking for, that's all."

Several children laughed.

"I hope it isn't something I'll have to confiscate," said Miss Montgomery.

"No Miss."

"Then please bring your homework sheets to the front and leave them on my desk."

Simon dug through his bag for the sheets, trying not to let Zac be seen. Zac lay still, as if he was just an ordinary teddy bear, but that was bad enough. Plenty of the children would tease Simon if they knew he'd brought a teddy bear to school. He walked to the front of the room, hands shaking. This was

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worse than that time in P.E. when he'd kicked a ball at an open goal and missed. He laid the sheets on top of the pile on Miss Montgomery's desk and returned to his seat. He wanted to hide under it.

Once everybody had handed in their homework, Miss Montgomery said, "The first lesson today is English, and seeing as it's nearly the end of term, I thought we'd do something fun. I'd like each of you to write a story about what you want to be when you grow up." Several of the children groaned—apparently that didn't fit with their idea of "fun."

"Write about what you might do on a typical day," Miss Montgomery continued, "from when you get up to when you go to bed. You can draw a picture to go with the story if you like. Then in the next period, some of you can read your stories aloud in front of the class. Off you go."

Simon took a pencil and some paper from his bag. Zac was still there, his one eye staring at nothing. Simon zipped the bag shut and tried to think of what to write. Normally he loved writing stories, but his imagination refused to come up with anything now. All he could think about was Zac, and how the bear couldn't have got into his bag without being seen. But obviously he had. He was a magical bear, after all.

What was Simon going to write about? He couldn't write about a teddy bear, still less a magical one. That was possibly the least grown-up thing imaginable. What *did* Simon want to be when he grew up? He'd never really thought about it. He wasn't sure he wanted to be a grown-up. It would be nice not to have to do maths homework, and it would be nice to have money of his own, but he didn't like the thought of being tired all the time, or of having to go into work on his day off just because someone else was sick. Maybe he'd go to university like his big sister Joan.

"All right, children, time's up," said Miss Montgomery.

That couldn't be right, Simon thought. He'd only been sitting there for five minutes. But a glance at the clock above the blackboard showed him Miss Montgomery was telling the truth. Simon looked at his sheet of paper. On it he'd written, *When I*

grow up I want to go to university to study magical teddy bears.

“Now, children,” said Miss Montgomery, “who would like to come to the front and read their story to the class?” Several hands shot up. “Simon?” she asked.

Simon hadn’t raised his hand. There was no way he could read out what he’d just written. “I, um, I think I should let someone else take their turn, Miss.”

A few children sniggered. Miss Montgomery narrowed her eyes and tilted her head, as if she knew exactly why Simon didn’t want to go to the front. She invited Alex to be the first to read.

Alex cleared her throat and said, “When I grow up I want to be an astronaut. If I was an astronaut, I would go to the launch pad at eight o’clock in the morning and blast off to work in my rocket. I work in a space station. I get there at nine o’clock. There is not much traffic in the way, although I have to look out for meteor showers. The space station is like an ordinary station, but in space, so everything floats around.”

Simon found his attention wandering to Zac and what he was going to do to the little creature for giving him such a fright in front of his classmates.

Scattered applause made Simon look up. Alex was walking back to her desk, and Oliver was going to the front. He told the class he wanted to be a racing driver. That wasn’t surprising—Formula One was all he talked about at playtime, and he was always bragging about beating the high scores for the racing games he had on his console.

Chantalle wanted to be a reality TV star—preferably a singer, though she wasn’t fussy. Simon didn’t watch those shows. Joan sometimes did. She’d had an argument with Daddy when he’d said the contestants were more worried about being the centre of attention than about being decent singers.

Yasmin wanted to be a police officer, which surprised Simon. The last time they’d spoken about it, she’d wanted to be a hairdresser or a chef or a dog walker. Simon hadn’t believed anyone would buy a dog if they didn’t have time to walk it themselves, but Yasmin had assured him that enough people

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did that she could make a living from them.

Moirra wanted to be a scientist, working in a laboratory and inventing cool new things. Robert wanted to be a builder, so he could build a big house for his family, because the one they lived in now was too small for them.

“Simon?” said Miss Montgomery. “Would you like to read your story to us?”

Simon started to rub out the word “magical” in case the teacher asked to see his work, and then the bell rang for play-time.

“Some other time, perhaps,” said Miss Montgomery, and dismissed the class.

End of Free Sample

Thank you for reading. *Simon and the Birthday Wish* is on sale now—visit www.pembers.net for details of where to buy a copy.