

SPOOKS

Book Four of Zach's Story



Wendy Milton

Spooks

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Zach's Story Continues...



Zach Brinkley and Sophie Ferguson have begun their secondary school education at Josiah Batty Grammar, a prestigious school on Bottleneck Bay's north shore. In his first year, Zach is pursued by the vengeful spirit of the school's founder, who expects him to expose the unlawful activities of the headmaster! Fortunately, Zach survives this unwelcome mission.

Now Zach is in his second year. Will it be less traumatic? The discovery that there are 'spooks' watching the school, coupled with the arrival of a mysterious foreign boy, initiates a train of events that places not only Zach's life, but the life of the new boy in danger.

ONE

In the front room of 48 Denison Street, Mr and Mrs Brinkley, tousled and smiling, watched as their gifts began to be unwrapped. Still in their dressing gowns, they sat side-by-side, their attention focused on their four children who were seated beneath a brightly decorated tree. Only one child and his dog were visible, but that didn't matter (Mr Brinkley was fond of saying 'visibility isn't everything'). Sunlight streamed through the bay windows, making the tree's mirrored baubles glitter and sparkle. The warmth of the morning had given rise to a wonderful pine-needly smell.

Unseen hands were opening the parcel labelled 'Milly'. Zach, who'd already opened his presents (an iPad and running shoes), was helping Billy open his. There was another, unusually shaped parcel that was being levitated this way and that, and rolled around by its waif-like recipient in an attempt to guess at the contents. Astra's exclamations of joy and surprise, together with those of the twins, could only be heard

by Zach; likewise their laughter, directed at Patches who was wearing spongy reindeer antlers. Patches was whining excitedly and pawing at his oblong-shaped parcel, tearing at it with his teeth. Every time he crushed it with his paw it emitted a tantalising squeak.

Milly's eyes glistened as she levitated her beautifully dressed Victorian doll and 'waltzed' her around the room. Astra's eyes were shining, even though she hadn't opened her parcel. She was sitting cross-legged with her hands on either side of it as if it didn't really matter what was inside. 'Thank you, Mr Brinkley, Mrs Brinkley but . . . I haven't got anything for you.'

Zach whispered to his father who in turn whispered to his wife.

'Oh, good heavens, Astra! You gave us the most precious thing in this world . . . our son's life. What you did is something Jack and I will never forget. You're our guardian angel, too. Would you like me to open it for you?'

Astra nodded.

'She says yes.'

Zach's mother caught the parcel that floated towards her and removed the wrapping to reveal a scruffy, synthetic fur dog with glassy brown eyes. Around the dog's neck was a collar with an embroidered tag saying 'Scratch'.

'Oh, he's beautiful!' exclaimed Astra, levitating him back and attempting to cuddle him. 'It's just what

Scratch was like. I'm going to keep him with me forever and ever and ever.'

'She's blubbering,' groaned Billy.

Patches had stopped tearing at his parcel to stare at Scratch. He uttered a low growl.

'Patches thinks he's real!' shrieked Billy.

Zach glanced at his mother and father. 'Astra likes the dog and Milly likes her doll. They're crying. Billy's not crying but that doesn't mean he doesn't like the chess set.'

'Why would I blubber because someone gives me a present? It's what girls do. Anyway, this chess set is really cool, Mr Brinkley.'

'It's from Mum, too.'

'Oh . . . thanks, Mrs Brinkley.'

'Billy says the chess set is cool.'

Billy's eyes wandered hungrily over the crimson-coated nineteenth-century officers and their grey opponents. He wanted to line them up and fight a battle.

'I'm pleased you like them, Billy,' said Zach's father. 'Zach will help you get them into the spare room. His mother has cleared it out and refurnished it so it isn't a junk room any more. It's a room where our three invisible children can chill out.'

Zach's mother smiled. 'There are bunk beds in case you need them and there's a wicker armchair for Milly's doll and a basket for Scratch and a table with an inlaid

chessboard so Billy can set up his pieces as soon as he learns to levitate. It would have been nice to give you a room each but I'm afraid our house isn't big enough.'

'Can Billy and I go up now?'

'Of course! Your father and I will stay here with the girls and they can take Victoria and Scratch up when they're ready.'

The doll named Victoria and the scruffy dog named Scratch rose into the air. But instead of heading for the stairs, they bobbed towards Mrs Brinkley. When they reached her they 'kissed' her on both cheeks.

Upstairs, Billy watched as Zach lined up the chessmen in the chill-out room. Apart from the occasional spat, he and Zach got along reasonably well now because he wasn't teasing Astra as much.

'These are great,' he breathed as the painted chessmen gathered at either end of the board. 'So's your dad. He can do anything.'

'Yeah.'

'When you were in hospital your dad and mum weren't together, were they?'

'No.'

'Why did they split up?' Zach shrugged. 'I suppose it doesn't matter, 'cause they're back together.' Zach nodded. 'They give you nice things, don't they?'

'Yeah.'

'Like that laptop.'

'It's an iPad.'

'Whatever. I wish *I* could use one.'

'You can use mine when you can levitate.'

'You wouldn't mind?' Zach shook his head. 'Cool! And we could play chess when I learn how.'

'I can't play chess. Sophie can. She could teach you. She belongs to the chess club.'

'I know but she's . . . she hangs out with Drew. He's taller than I am and he's . . .'

'Alive?'

'Yeah.' Billy hesitated. 'You'll be fourteen next year. You're already taller than I am.'

'S'pose so.'

'Ghosts don't grow. I wish *I* could grow.'

Zach's answer was so profound, he surprised himself. 'You can't get any bigger but that doesn't mean you can't grow if you keep learning things and changing . . . you know?'

'Milly says my head's big enough already.'

'People who can't change don't grow,' Zach insisted. 'It's got nothing to do with size.'

'In a few years you'll be a man and I'll still be twelve.'

'So?'

'Will you still talk to me?'

'Why not? My dad talks to you, doesn't he?'

'Yeah.' Billy paused. He looked slyly at Zach. 'Reckon we'll see Sophie or do you think she's gone to Drew's place.'

Zach shrugged. 'People spend Christmas with their own families.'

But in the afternoon, after those who could eat had devoured large portions of Mrs Brinkley's roast dinner, Sophie did pay them a visit. She'd brought a present for Zach: a pair of socks. She admired Billy's chessmen and Astra's Scratch and Milly's doll and Zach's shoes. Although she hadn't brought it with her, she told them about the laptop from her parents. Then, after complimenting Mrs Brinkley on her Christmas cake and Mr Brinkley on the chess set, she left. Zach watched her go. She probably *was* going to see Drew. They spent a lot of time together and it was clear to him that Drew liked Sophie. It was never clear to him how much Sophie liked Drew.

After Sophie had gone and the others were trying to fathom the rules of chess, Zach's mind dwelt upon the year that had passed. His first term hadn't ended happily, coinciding as it did with the headmaster's breakdown. Everyone had wanted to know why Pettigrew was chasing him. Had he and Mr Pettigrew been talking to someone in the classroom that no one else could see? Was it a ghost? Whose ghost? Could he talk to ghosts? Was it the ghost who'd told him that the headmaster was selling dodgy art? Sophie had assured him it would 'die down' and she'd been right. But then, Sophie was usually right.

On the up side, Josiah Batty, aka JB, stopped following him. But after Pettigrew's exposure, JB turned into a nemmy-without-a-cause, a pathetic reflection of his former, fiery self. He drifted aimlessly around the school sighing and moaning and shaking his head in a way that ought to have aroused sympathy in Zach had Zach been a more sympathetic boy. Then, one hot afternoon at the end of the fourth term, during a cricket match, there came a moment when Zach had looked up, hands outstretched in an attempt to catch a high ball from the opposing team's batsman. What he saw was JB, zigging and zagging and looking behind him fearfully. Zach couldn't see JB's pursuer but he guessed it was Spittingham. Later, Astra confirmed that it *was* Spittingham. Someone had tipped off the fanatical grunter because he was carrying a net large enough to encompass JB's winged armchair!

It had all been over in seconds. JB disappeared with a shriek and Zach missed his all-important catch. The others had jeered and called him names. That evening Zach told his father it was his best day ever at Josiah Batty. JB had left for good and there was no possibility Mr Boxer would select him for the school's junior cricket team!