

SOPHIE'S RETURN

Book Two of Zach's Story



Wendy Milton

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Second Edition

WENDY MILTON

ILLUSTRATED BY PATRICK HAWKINS



THE STORY SO FAR . . .

Zach Brinkley, aged eleven and three quarters, is hit by a truck and rushed, by ambulance, to hospital. Doctors resuscitate him, but he remains on life support. Whilst on life support he meets some bizarre beings, including murdered twins Milly and Billy Creevey, and an irritating 'winged thing' called Astra, whose life as a street urchin ended in the Great Fire of London in 1666. Zach also learns to 'loam', a technique of leaving his body and coming back to it ('loaming' is Astra's word for having an out-of-body experience). It's this ability to loam that helps Zach unmask Bruce Gosling – alias 'the Goose' – the villain who's trying to kill him.

Zach recovers, but he's unhappy because he's lost the angel to whom he owes his life. Once, he'd asked Astra whether there was any chance of her becoming alive again. 'Oh, there's always their stupid lottery,' she'd replied. 'The first prize is reincarnation, but I've never

known anyone who won it. I'm told that people who win have their memories wiped before they're sent back, so they might get to be reborn but they can't remember anything about their earlier lives! What's the good of that? What's the point of winning if you can't *remember* that you've won?

Astra does find a way of being reunited with Zach, but it involves losing her angelic status. This doesn't worry her, because she prefers Earth to Heaven. When she reappears in early May – ten weeks after Zach's accident – she tells him she's now an unquiet spirit, like Milly and Billy, and that she's helping the twins with the case of a young girl, Natalie Taylor, who's in terrible danger.

ONE

Astra being a bit singed didn't worry Zach. She still had the same sweet smile and the same artless disposition, and because she was no longer an angel, he could see her and hear her. At home there were a few problems, like not being able to explain to his mother why he appeared to be talking to himself and why Patches barked and wagged his tail at empty spaces. By far the biggest problem was what to do with his body while he was loaming.

On the morning of Sunday, 8th June, Zach appeared to be sleeping late. His mother stood outside his door, listening, before sticking her head into the room. In the dimness an observer could make out the single bed with its brightly coloured quilt. There were heavy curtains across the window. The computer on the desk seemed to be awaiting the touch of human fingers, but Zach's hands were motionless. The much-loved books on the shelves looked as if they'd like to be taken down

and re-read, but Zach's eyes were closed. The toys that had given so much pleasure before being outgrown looked as if they'd like to know that they were still loved. Did Augustus Bear know what was wrong? From the end of the bed, Augustus Bear's orange eyes stared glassily at his owner's inert body. The bear and Zach had much in common: like the bear, Zach wasn't there.

Zach's mother pushed open the door. 'Are you awake, darling?' All she could hear was the rhythmic rise and fall of Zach's breathing. 'Patches will want to be fed soon, and you know he prefers you to feed him and take him for a walk.' There was no response. It was just like it had been in hospital when Zach was being kept alive by machines. His mother gave an involuntary shudder. 'He's *still* asleep,' she said to Zach's father when she went downstairs. 'I'm worried, Jack. He never used to sleep this much. He doesn't even wake when I talk to him. Something's wrong.'

'He's eleven, Julia. Boys of that age sleep a lot.'

Mrs Brinkley frowned. 'If he's not down here in half an hour, I'll wake him. Too much sleep isn't healthy.'

'Nonsense. It's Sunday morning. Let him sleep.'

TWO

In truth, Zach wasn't getting enough sleep. He'd been awakened at 4.30 am by Astra and Billy arguing, and by the pale, bluish light from his companions' three ghostly auras; then the four of them had headed off to the suburb of Clifton at the northern tip of Bottleneck Bay. They were in the kitchen of a bungalow occupied by Natalie Taylor, her father and her stepmother.

Sophie Ferguson, the fifth member of the 'Save Natalie' team, was pacing up and down in her bedroom at Lamington, clutching her mobile. She'd tried calling Natalie, but there was no answer. Why didn't one of the others come back and tell her what was happening?

Natalie, who wasn't a channeller, was unaware of the presence of Zach, Astra and the twins when she confronted her stepmother. 'I *won't* eat, and I *don't* want to go with you to any stupid lookout. You're a witch and I hate you. Where's my dad?'

'Your father's asleep. When he wakes up I'll tell him what you've called me. Witch indeed!'

Natalie's stepmother, Edwina, was a tall, angular woman with a flat, featureless face (Natalie had told Sophie that Edwina's face reminded her of a pancake with holes). Edwina's eyes were cold, and her voice, coming from a moneybox mouth, had no warmth or musicality.

'The kid's right,' sniggered Billy. 'All Eddy needs is a broomstick.'

Natalie ran to the back of the house and beat her fists against her father's locked bedroom door. 'Daddy!' she screamed. 'Wake up! *Please* wake up!' There was no response.

Her stepmother watched her from the end of the hallway. Why had Natalie refused to drink her hot chocolate? It was as if she *knew*. Edwina was unaware that Sophie had warned Natalie to drink only milk from the refrigerator, and Zach and Sophie were unaware that Edwina had laced the milk in the refrigerator with sedatives! Now the Witch was congratulating herself. Natalie would be getting sleepy soon, and it would be a simple matter of driving her to the lookout, rolling her loathsome little body over the edge and starting to weep. She'd always been good at faking tears. She'd flag down a motorist, and then there would be police and explanations. She'd say, 'It was such a lovely morning, and Natalie did *so* want

to watch the sun coming up over the valley. Oh, dear God, how I regret taking her!'

'How do you reckon she'll do it?' said Billy. 'Strangulation? Smothering would be better because it wouldn't leave any marks.'

'You're so horrible,' snapped Astra. 'The Witch isn't going to do anything, because *we're* here to stop her.'

'I only meant how do you reckon she'll *try* to do it. I didn't mean I *wanted* her to do it.' He paused. 'I've written a song. Want to hear it?' Billy began to rap.

*In a deadly trap was poor young Nat,
'Cause nothing could be meaner
Than her evil stepmother
The hideous Edwina.
Edwina's eyes were like a snake's,
Her heart as black as pitch.
Who would save young Natalie
From this wicked witch?*

Milly sighed. 'This isn't the time, Billy.'

'It's too short anyway,' said Astra. 'Is there more?'

'Yeah, but I don't know how it's going to end, so I've written *two* endings, just in case . . .'

'*Billy!*'

Natalie made a dash for her bedroom and slammed the door. Zach, Astra and the twins followed, gliding through walls like cameras in the movies.

'She's searching for something,' said Astra.

'Your father's asleep. When he wakes up I'll tell him what you've called me. Witch indeed!'

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'We've discussed this, haven't we? We need her to be caught in the act.'

'What if nobody comes?' For once Zach was thinking along the same lines as Billy. 'She's wrapping Natalie in a blanket!'

Natalie's stepmother picked up the limp body and carried it down the hallway, through the kitchen and into the yard. Holding Natalie under one arm, she opened the boot of her car and lifted Natalie's blanketed body inside. Then she got into the driver's seat.

'She's getting away, Mill!' yelled Billy. 'Do something!'

The Witch had started the engine when, suddenly, the windscreen exploded, cracking all over into a silvery mass that was impossible to see through. The Witch switched off the ignition and got out. How could a rock from the garden edging fly up and hit the windscreen? She looked around and then, using her coat, punched the glass outwards to make a hole. She'd have to say a passing car threw up a stone just as they reached the lookout, but what about the glass on the driveway? They'd want to know why she left the house with a shattered windscreen. Cursing, she went inside to get a pan and brush.

'She's left her keys. Can you get them, Mill?'

'I'll try.'

The keys came out, but they fell onto the floor just as the Witch returned. While the Witch began sweeping up glass, Milly levitated the keys through the hole in

the windscreen and dropped them over the neighbour's fence.

The Witch emptied the fragments of glass into the garbage and got back into the car. Where were her keys? She searched the floor and patted her pockets. How could her keys disappear? Grimly, she went into the house and emerged with a second set.

'Spares,' groaned Zach.

She got back into the driver's seat, started the car and began moving down the driveway. Then the gates slammed shut. The Witch got out, re-opened them and got back into the car, but the gates slammed shut again. Short of driving through them, there was nothing Edwina could do.

'They're here!' cried Billy. A police car had suddenly nosed into the driveway, effectively blocking the Witch's exit.

'I'm sorry, madam,' said Constable Brent when the Witch wound down her window. 'We've had a report of an abused child at this address and we have to check it out. Would you mind stepping out of the car, please?'

'There's noise coming from the boot, Charlie,' said his partner. 'Quick. Get the keys. I think she's locked the kid in the boot!'