

MISSING UNCLE IZZY



Wendy Milton

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WENDY MILTON
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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The author apologises for the fact that Uncle Izzy, who is important to this story, is missing for the better part of it.



ONE

Can a house have ‘presence’? A person with ‘presence’ has the power to attract attention and command respect. When we say that a house has presence – or *a* presence – it generally means it’s haunted.

Farewell Manor, sitting darkly in the landscape at Cockle Bay in a remote part of northern New South Wales, had ‘presence’ in both senses; it commanded attention and admiration, but it also – if local residents could be believed – had a resident ghost. The manor wasn’t easily accessible, given its remote location, the nearest settlement being Mangrove (an insignificant coastal town that grew up around the Wullumbimby Estuary at the mouth of the River Tay). Mangrove wasn’t known for its natural beauty or its distinctive architecture, so only the manor, two and a half kilometres outside of the town, was notable. It had been built in the 1890s by a retired sea captain, Silas Henderson.

Visitors expressing an interest in Farewell Manor

(though visitors to Mangrove were rare) were assured by locals that it was haunted by the ghost of Alfie, Silas Henderson’s great-great-grandson. Alfie’s ghost roamed the grounds, they said, and his presence had been felt by the intrepid few who’d ventured across the manor’s rotting floorboards and risked being hit by falling plaster from its water-stained, ornamental ceilings.

Alfie Henderson had disappeared without a trace in the early 1980s, after spending his life searching, like his father and grandfather before him, for ‘Henderson’s hoard’. Silas’s treasure was worth finding, because Silas had plied the China trade and amassed vast amounts of gold and jewellery looted from Chinese temples. Like many Victorians (there was an economic depression in the 1890s), Silas didn’t trust banks, so he buried his treasure and promised to tell his sons, George and William, where it was. But George ran away to sea, eventually resettling in England, whilst William, when he was sixteen, had a terrible argument with his father and left home. By the time William returned, Silas was dead.

Where had Silas hidden his loot? First William, then William’s son, Harold, and then Harold’s son, Edward, spent years looking for it. When Edward died, he bequeathed the legend of Henderson’s hoard to *his* son, Alfie. At the time of Alfie’s disappearance, the Cockle Bay property resembled a moonscape.

TWO

Eleven-year-old Ben Haversham lived at 35 Mudflat Drive, Mangrove, a modern, two-storey, ordinary-looking weatherboard house. Ben didn't have much presence to speak of because he lacked confidence, a deficiency suggested by his poor posture and difficulty in maintaining eye contact.

On Monday mornings, Mr Johanssen asked members of Ben's class to talk about what they'd done over the weekend. Ben had never volunteered, partly because he didn't want to stand up in front of the class, and partly because he didn't think what he'd done at the weekend would interest anyone. This weekend, however, he'd attended a funeral, and as far as he knew no one had ever talked about going to a funeral. Telling them about his uncle's funeral wouldn't be difficult – would it? He took the plunge, but when he got to the bit about the disappearing laptop, talking proved more difficult than he'd anticipated.

'Uncle Izzy said he'd leave it to me in his Will,' he said hesitantly, 'but he didn't. He . . . took it with him.'

Mr Johanssen blinked. 'I beg your pardon?'

Ben's eyes were very bright. 'He took it with him.' 'How could he do that?' cried Stinker Wainwright.

There were sniggers.

'He left instructions for it to be put in with him . . . on his lap.' The memory of the silver laptop being lowered into Uncle Izzy's coffin brought tears to Ben's eyes. He tried to stop them, but they rolled down his cheeks.

Mr Johanssen placed a consolatory hand on Ben's shoulder. 'I *am* sorry, Ben. Why don't you go outside for a while and sit in the sun?' He nodded at a dark-haired girl in the third row. 'Go with him, please, Abby. Now, you come back when you're good and ready, Ben.'

In the deserted playground, the trees were turning red and gold and there were carpets of leaves on the grey asphalt. Abby sat on a bench and Ben sat beside her.

'Was it a good laptop?'

'The best – a thirteen-inch MacBook Pro with Retina display and sixteen gigabytes of memory and four Thunderbolt ports and a headphone jack . . .'

'I suppose your parents won't buy you another one?' 'Fat chance!'

'Did your uncle let you use it?'

'He *wanted* me to use it, 'cause he kept showing me how to do things . . .'

'Did he *say* he was getting ready to leave it to you?'

'Well, not "getting ready" . . . I mean, how could he *know* he was going to die? Maybe he was joking when he said he'd leave it to me in his Will.'

'*How* did he die?'

'They told Mum he had a heart attack, but she says there was nothing wrong with Uncle Izzy's heart.'

'Was he working on his laptop when . . .?'

'That's what's so weird! He put it into a safety deposit box, and *after* he died his solicitor got a letter, asking for it to be buried with him. Uncle Izzy wanted it to be part of the funeral service. He even wrote special words.'

'Was he . . .?'' Abby tapped the side of her head.

'He was different, but he wasn't crazy.'

'Surely you'd only put a laptop into a safety deposit box if you wanted to protect what was on it, wouldn't you? What if your uncle kept a secret on it that someone else wanted?'

Uncle Izzy *was* secretive, so Abby's theory had already occurred to Ben. 'Odd' was how Ben's mother described her brother. She'd told Ben not to place too much importance on anything his uncle said or did. Uncle Izzy would disappear for months at a time, and then reappear wearing clothes they didn't recognise and looking seriously scruffy. 'Going bush,' Ben's mother called it.

Had Uncle Izzy been keeping secret information? Why didn't he leave his laptop to the person he was saving this secret information for? Was it a secret so dark that he didn't want anyone to know about it? If so, why keep it at all?

That afternoon, as he entered the kitchen, Ben heard Mrs Bellamy's high-pitched voice saying, '*Such* a sensitive boy.' Mrs Bellamy was their neighbour, and a frequent visitor since Uncle Izzy's death. She'd attended the funeral. 'And here's the boy himself,' she gushed. 'I *do* hope you're feeling better, Ben. You were so upset at the church. You obviously cared for your uncle very much.'

'Yeah.'

'We *both* cared for him,' said Ben's mother.

'Well of course, Deirdre dear. I wasn't inferring you didn't. Goodness me, he was your brother – your *only* brother, I believe?'

'Yes. There were just the two of us.'

Mrs Bellamy clicked her tongue, and her eyes searched Ben's mother's face. There were questions she was dying to ask, but as Ben made no attempt to leave the kitchen, she felt constrained.

'He was rather . . . unconventional, wasn't he? I never spoke with him, of course, but I did get the impression from the glimpses . . . well, from things you've said, really, that he was . . . er . . . bohemian?'

'Uncle Izzy was *Australian*,' said Ben.

'Mrs Bellamy means your uncle was a free spirit,' said his mother. 'He wasn't like ordinary people.'

'So who wants to be ordinary?'

'I'm sure he was *extraordinarily* good at whatever it was you told me he did for a living, Deirdre, though I've forgotten, now, what you said that was . . .?'

Mrs Bellamy shook her grey head. 'It's not like me to be so forgetful.'

'Put your mind at rest, Agnes. I've never mentioned what my brother did, so you're not suffering memory loss – not yet, anyway.'

Mrs Bellamy laughed. '*That's* a relief.' Then, resigning herself to the fact that no information was forthcoming, she left.

'Nosy woman,' said Ben's mother.

'We don't know *what* Uncle Izzy did.'

'No, but I wasn't going to tell *her* that.'

'Dad says he must've been doing something dodgy, because . . .'

'Now look here, Benjamin.' His mother waggled her finger. 'Your father's views about your uncle are entirely wrong. Your father is . . . is . . .'

'Ordinary?'

'Yes, and intolerant of anyone who *isn't* ordinary or who's . . .'

'Secretive?'

'Oh, yes! It's always irked your father that Izzy never spoke about himself or said what he was doing. How my

brother earned his living may have been a mystery, but *I* knew him better than anyone, and *I* know Izzy would never have done anything "dodgy". Your uncle was honest and decent and . . .' Here Ben's mother broke down. The tears she'd kept under control during the funeral flowed, and there was little Ben could do to console her.

'He absolutely *adored* you, Ben,' she snuffled. 'From the moment you were born, he was around here as often as his job – whatever it was – would allow. He'd turn up at the oddest hours to feed you and play with you, and he'd nurse you until you went to sleep. He was always bringing you presents, like that watch you're wearing and your leather jacket. And what about all those books? He was always buying you books. He wanted you to have everything, because he loved you.'

'Why didn't he leave me his laptop, then?' Ben was thinking.