



# Angel of Fire

Book 1 of Zach's Story

Fourth Edition

WENDY MILTON

ILLUSTRATED BY PATRICK HAWKINS



## ONE

On Saint Valentine's Day, something terrible happened to Zach Brinkley, an awkward boy with a prickly disposition and a thatch of dark, curly hair. To find out what happened, readers must travel to a building on the outskirts of Lamington, a suburb of the coastal city of Bottleneck Bay. This building caters for people entering the world, people leaving the world and assorted sickly souls in between. It has a giant carpark, a gift shop, an information desk and a sanitized, white-and-chrome cafeteria. As the reader may have guessed, it's a hospital – Lamington General Hospital, to be precise – which is where an ambulance brought Zach Brinkley on that ill-fated Saint Valentine's Day. He was rushed into Emergency at 8.45 am, where doctors began frantically trying to resuscitate him. At 8.50 am, when this story opens, Zach's heart still isn't beating. Zach Brinkley is clinically dead.

## TWO

Zach felt cold, but not an ordinary, shivery cold. He felt as if he'd been turned to stone. Where was he? Why couldn't he move? Only his brain seemed to be functioning, but it was confused. He couldn't see his surroundings because his eyes were glued shut. He could 'see' with his mind's eye, however, and what he could see was a winged creature that glimmered and shimmered and hovered over him like a demented moth. She spoke in a childish voice, using expressions like 'behind the veil' and 'passing over' and 'going on before'. When Zach made it clear to her that he didn't know what she was talking about, she told him that she was trying to say he was dead.

*'I am not dead!!!'*

'Oh, but you *are*,' said the winged thing in a haven't-I-just-told-you-so voice that made Zach want to hit her. She darted around him like an insect, zigzagging from side to side. She reminded him of Sophie Ferguson,

a bossy know-it-all girl in his class whom he'd also have liked to swat down.

Zach was angry, but not just because the winged thing was telling him he was dead when clearly he wasn't. Zach had *been* angry for over a year, ever since his parents split up. He'd become bad-tempered and hard to get on with. His friends started avoiding him, but he told himself he didn't care. At lunch and recess he kept to himself, wondering whether his classmates had turned his solitariness into a joke. Were they laughing at him? Had they started calling him names? The mere suspicion made him grumpier.

Get rid of the anger, I hear you say? Not so easy when its source was in Zach's face every living moment of every day, poisoning the air he breathed and destroying what was left of the life he'd known.

'I can assure you, you *are* dead,' repeated the winged thing without emotion. 'But I understand how you feel, Zach. It *is* Zach, isn't it?' She consulted her clipboard. 'Yes . . . Zach Brinkley, aged eleven and three quarters.' She made clucking noises with her tongue. 'No one likes to face the fact, but you'll get used to it. I'm here to help. It's my job. I'll be with you all the way, as they say.' She sounded like a tour guide. 'That means,' she added, 'I'll be taking you through the steps necessary to get you to your final resting place. It's complicated, you know.'

Final resting place? *No way!* With those words Zach

felt a tremendous shock in his chest. It hurt. Then came another shock, and his body lurched upwards and fell back down again. He could hear shouting and voices, but they didn't include the voice of the winged thing. She seemed to have disappeared.

## THREE

The team trying to kick-start Zach's heart had administered an electric shock. Had it been too great? When Zach's body lurched upwards, he was thrown out of it and remained out of it when it fell back down. He floated to the ceiling, looking down at himself on the table with figures in green fussing over him. It was like seeing himself through the eyes of someone else.

Around his prostrate form he could hear the figures in green talking about his 'vital signs'. 'I'm up here,' he tried to say, but no one heard him.

'I think we've lost him,' someone said. That was when Zach felt himself being sucked through several layers of building. On the way up he caught sight of corridors and operating theatres and nurses, and rooms full of beds and pyjama-clad patients before he landed, finally, on the hospital's flat, concrete roof. It didn't hurt, but it did surprise him to find himself in the full glare of the morning sun. The view was amazing. Above the treetops,



suburbs stretched endlessly. He could see office blocks and shops and houses, and roadways full of cars. The red roofs of the houses shimmered in a summery haze and sunlight glinted off the windows of the tall buildings. On the very edge of the horizon something glittered, like an oasis. Was it the sea? Zach was too peeved to care. Why couldn't he have remained in the same room as his body?

Then he realised that he wasn't alone on the roof. There was a grey-haired man in a hospital gown sitting on the edge with his legs dangling into space. Was he going to jump? Zach felt obliged to say something. 'Shouldn't you move back? What if you fall?'

'... And *hurt* myself?' The man looked up and his expression changed to one of amusement. 'Move back,' he repeated slowly. He gave a feverish laugh. '*Move back!!!*' He chuckled, and his eyes, in their hollow sockets, glimmered. 'Oh, that's a good one. *Very* funny.'

'I wasn't *trying* to be funny.'

'Sorry.' The man wiped his eyes. 'I appreciate your concern. What happened to *you*?'

'I don't know.'

'What's the last thing you remember?'

'Walking to school.'

'Do you think you were hit?'

'How would *I* know? I told you, I don't remember.'

'You won't be used to any of this, will you?'

'Any of what?'

'The fuss and the bother. At least we're not the ones filling out the forms.'

'Forms?'

'They've got forms for everything. People think passing over is easy, but it's worse than trying to get a passport.'

'What happens next?'

The man shook his head and his eyes sank back into their sockets. 'Usually she fills out Section 4(b) of the TT3 – that's a Temporary Transfer Form – and I go back.'

'She?'

The man ignored Zach's question. He sighed. 'This is the *third* time it's happened and I'm getting sick of it, *I* can tell you. If I go back it will only happen again.'

'What?'

'My heart. It's not much fun having a bad heart. It's Valentine's Day today. Don't you think that's ironic? *I* do. I'm on the list for a transplant, but at my age getting a heart is highly unlikely . . . unless, of course, they give me yours.'

'*Mine*? Why would they give you *my* heart?'

The man looked embarrassed. 'Well . . . it depends on what your parents say, of course . . . whether they give their permission, I mean. It would be a shame to let it go to waste.'

'But it's *my* heart. They can't give you *my* heart!'

'They can if you're not using it.'

'But I *am* using it!'

The man sighed. 'You really don't know what's going on, do you?'

'No. Am I . . . am I . . .'

'Dead? At the moment they're trying to resuscitate you. I thought she might come and tell you to go back, but no one's turned up yet so maybe this is it for *both* of us!'

'*She?*'

The man shrugged. 'Bossy little thing. Astra. Carries a clipboard. Bad case of jaundice.'

'Spiky hair and wings?'

'Yes. She's the one who tells you whether it's your time or not.'

'Well, it's *not* my time and I'm *not* going to hang around waiting for her.' No one named after a brand of margarine was going to tell *him* what to do. 'I'm going back.'

'You can't *choose* to go back. It isn't that easy.'

'Watch me.' Zach concentrated with all his might, willing himself back through the roof, but the roof remained stubbornly solid. He could hardly thump on the concrete or jump up and down, so he did what he always did when a tantrum was out of the question – he bargained. '*Please, please, please,*' he said to whatever interfering deity had sucked him onto the roof in the first place. '*Please* let me go back. If you do, I won't be mean to my mum, and I'll clean up my room and I'll do my homework and I'll . . . I'll . . .'

*Whoosh!terpop!* It was like being squeezed through the neck of a bottle. After travelling downwards through several layers of hospital, Zach found himself back beneath the ceiling of the room where his body lay. So far, so good. He'd popped out of his body, so surely he could pop back in again? It was like trying to reach the bottom of a swimming pool filled with jelly; the harder he thrust downwards, the more he seemed to bounce back, like a rubber duck. He could see them putting something on his chest, and when they switched it on, his body convulsed. Again and again they did it, and with each convulsion Zach felt he was getting closer.

'We'll give it one more try,' said a big man in a mask. It was Zach's last chance. As his body convulsed he threw himself forward with tremendous effort, and when his body fell back he fell with it.

'*I've got a heartbeat!*' someone shouted, and everybody cheered.