

Chapter 6 - Zach

"Hello!" he said brightly, grasping Willie's hand. There was a loud squelching of mud as he shook it.

"Sorry!" gasped Willie in embarrassment.

The strange boy grinned and wiped his hand on the seat of his shorts. "You're William Beech, aren't you?" Willie nodded. "Pleased to meet you. I'm Zacharias Wrench."

"Oh," said Willie.

"Yes, I know. It's a mouthful, isn't it? My parents have a cruel sense of humor. I'm called Zach for short."

The strange boy's eyes seemed to penetrate so deeply into Willie's that he felt sure he could read his thoughts. He averted his gaze and began hurriedly to cover the Anderson again.

"I say, can I help? I'd like to."

Willie was quite taken aback at being asked.

"I'm rather good at it, actually," Zach continued proudly. "I've given a hand at the creation of several. I wouldn't mess it up."

"Yeh," replied Willie quietly, "if you want."

"Thanks. I say," Zach said as he dumped a handful of earth on the side of the shelter, "I'll show you around. Do you like exploring?" Willie shrugged his shoulders. "I dunno."

"Is it your first visit to the country?" But before Willie could reply the boy was already chattering on. "It's not mine exactly. I've had odd holidays with friends and my parents, but this is the first time I've actually sort of *lived* in the country. I've read books that are set in the country and, of course, poems, and I've lived in towns *near* the country and gone into the country on Sundays or when there was no school."

He stopped and there was a moment of silence as they continued working. "You've not been here long, have you?" he asked after a while. Willie shook his head. "Else I'm sure I would have seen you around. You're different." Willie raised his head nervously. "Am I?"

"Yes, I sensed that as soon as I saw you. There's someone who's a bit of a loner, I thought, an independent sort of a soul like myself, perhaps." Willie glanced quickly at him. He felt quite tongue-tied. "You're living with Mr. Oakley, aren't you?" He nodded. "He's a bit of a recluse, I believe."

"Wot?" said Willie.

"A recluse. You know, keeps himself to himself."

"Oh."

"I say," said Zach suddenly, "we'll be at school together, won't we?"

Willie shrugged his shoulders again, "I dunno." He felt somewhat bewildered. He couldn't understand this exuberant friendliness in a boy he'd only had a glimpse of once. It was all too fast for him to take in.

"I expect you think I'm a bit forward," remarked Zach.

"Wot?"

"Forward. You know. But you see my parents work in the theater, and I'm so used to moving from town to town that I can't afford to waste time. As soon as I see someone I like, I talk to them."

Willie almost dropped the clod of earth he was holding. No one had ever said that they liked

him. He'd always accepted that no one did. Even his mum said she only liked him when he was quiet and still. For her to like him he had to make himself invisible. He hurriedly put the earth onto the shelter.

"I say," said Zach after a while, "I can't reach the top. Is there a ladder indoors?" Willie nodded. "Where is it?"

"In the hall. It's Mister Tom's."

"He won't mind, will he?"

"I dunno," whispered Willie, a little panic-stricken.

"I'll take the blame if there's any trouble," said Zach. "I say, maybe we can finish it and put the ladder back before he returns. It'll be a surprise then, won't it?" Willie nodded dumbly.

"Lead the way, then," cried Zach. "On, on, on," and with that they made their way towards the back door.

Meanwhile, after walking in almost total darkness with no lights to guide him save the fast darkening sky, Tom reached the village hall. It came as quite a shock to enter the brightly lit building. He shaded his eyes and blinked for a few seconds until he had adjusted to the change. There were far more people than he had anticipated, and the buzz of excited chatter was quite deafening. He tried to slip in unnoticed but it was too late. He had already been spotted by Mrs. Miller.

"Well, Mr. Oakley," she burred. "This is a surprise!"

He turned to frown her into silence. She was decked out in her Sunday best. A pink pillbox hat was perched precariously on her head, and pinned to its side was a large artificial purple flower. It hung half suspended over her mottled pudgy cheeks. The hat could have been a continuation of her face, Tom thought, the colors were so similar.

He cleared his throat. "Vicar called the meeting, so here I am."

"Yes, of course," said Mrs. Miller.

He glanced quickly round the hall. Some of the older boys were already in uniform, their buff-colored boxes slung over their shoulders. Mr. Peters, Charlie Ruddles and Mr. Bush were seated in front with Mr. Thatcher and Mr. Butcher. He slipped quietly to the back of the hall, catching sight of Nancy and Dr. Little, and acknowledged their presence with a slight gesture of his hand. He attempted to stand inconspicuously in a corner but it was useless, for most of the villagers nudged one another and turned to stare in his direction. Tom, as Zach said, kept himself to himself. He didn't hold with meetings or village functions. Since Rachel's death he hadn't joined in any of the social activities in Little Weirwold. In his grief he had cut himself off from people, and when he had recovered he had lost the habit of socializing.

"Evenin', Mr. Oakley," said Mrs. Fletcher, who was busy knitting in the back row. "Left the boy, has you?"

"With Sam," he added, by way of defense.

He had been surprised at Sam's willingness to stay, and had even felt a flicker of jealousy when the dog had flopped contentedly down in the grass beside the boy's feet.

Although most wireless owners had opened their doors so that people could listen to the King's message, Mr. Peters talked about it for those who had missed it. He mentioned the regulations regarding the blackout and the carrying of gas masks, and Mr. Thatcher, the tall,

ginger-haired father of the twin girls and their dark-haired sister, spoke about the procedure of action during an air raid. Gum boots and oilskins were given out and ordered for volunteers. It was decided that the first aid post would be at Dr. and Nancy Little's cottage and that the village hall was to be the rest centre. Mrs. Miller threw her puffy arm into the air and volunteered to run a canteen for any troops that might pass through. This suggestion was greeted with howls of laughter at the idea of anyone bothering to take a route that included Little Weirwold. However, Lillian Peters, seeing how hurt Mrs. Miller was, said that she thought that it was a good idea and suggested that a weekly gathering of the evacuated mothers and their infants would also be an excellent idea. Mrs. Miller sat down beaming, because she believed she had thought of it herself.

Mr. Bush announced that Mrs. Black had agreed to help at the school, as there would be an extra seventy children attending. Mrs. Black was a quiet-spoken old lady who had been retired for seven years.

"Coin' to have her hands full with some of that town lot," Tom remarked to himself.

Several people volunteered for being special constables, but Tom remained silent. His life had been well ordered and reasonably happy, he thought, because he had minded his own business. The last thing he wanted was to turn himself into a do-gooder, but he realized very quickly that most of the volunteers were genuinely and sincerely opening their hearts and homes. Mr. Thatcher stood up to talk about fire-watching duties.

"No one is allowed to do more than forty-eight hours a month," he said. "Just a couple hours a day."

Tom raised his arm.

Mr. Peters looked towards the back of the hall in surprise. "Yes, Tom?" he asked. "Did you wish to say something?"

"I'm volunteering, like," he said.

"I beg your pardon," said Mr. Thatcher in amazement.

"I'll do the two hours a day. Early in the mornin' like, or teatime. Can't leave the boy alone at night."

"No, no, of course not." Tom's name was hurriedly put down.

There was a murmur of surprise and enthusiasm in the hall. A tall, angular figure stood up. It was Emilia Thorne.

"Put mine there too," she said. "And while I'm about it, anyone who would like to join our Amateur Dramatics Group is very welcome. Meetings now on Thursdays, which means you can still attend practices at the first aid post on Wednesdays."

Soon a dozen or so hands were raised, and after their names had been written down and details of what their duties would involve, the meeting was brought to a close.

It was dark when Tom stepped out of the hall. He strode away towards the arched lane while the sound of chatter and laughter behind him gradually faded. He recollected, in his mild stupor, that Mrs. Fletcher and Emilia Thorne had spoken to him and that the doctor had asked after William and had said something about their boy being over at his place.

It was pitch black under the overhanging branches, and it wasn't until he reached the gate of Dobbs's field that he was able, at last, to distinguish the shapes of the trees, and Dobbs and the wall by the churchyard. He swung open the gate and shut it firmly behind him. "Bet Rachel's 'avin' a good laugh," he muttered wryly to himself, for not only had he volunteered

for firewatching duties, but he had also volunteered the services of Dobbs and the cart, since there was news of petrol rationing. He strolled over to the nag and slapped her gently. "I'll has to get you a gas mask and all, eh, ole girl. Seems we're both up to our necks in it now."

The stars were scattered in fragments across the sky. Tom stared up at them. It didn't seem possible that there was a war. The night was so still and peaceful. He suddenly remembered Willie.

"Hope he's had the sense to go inside," he mumbled, and he headed in the direction of home. He opened the little back gate and peered around in the dark for the shelter. He would have bumped into it if he hadn't heard voices.

"William! William! Where is you?"

" 'Ere, Mister Tom," said a voice by his side. Tom squinted down at him. "Ent you got sense enough to go indoors? You's'll catch cold in that wet jersey."

A loud scrabbling came from inside the Anderson and Sam leaped out of the entrance and tugged excitedly at his trousers. Tom picked him up, secretly delighted that he hadn't been deserted in affection. Sam licked his face, panting and barking.

"It was my idea," said a cultured voice. "To keep at it."

"Who's that?" asked Tom sharply.

"Me, Mr. Oakley," and he felt a hand touch his shirtsleeve.

Tom screwed up his eyes to look at Zach. He could make out what looked like a girl in the darkness.

"I just thought it was a shame to go inside on such a night as this," he continued, "so I persuaded Will to partake of my company for a while."

"Who's Will?" asked Tom bluntly.

"My name for William. He told me he was called Willie, but I thought that was a jolly awful thing to do to anyone. Willie just cries out for ridicule, don't you think? I mean," he went on, "it's almost as bad as Zacharias Wrench."

"What?" said Tom.

"Zacharias Wrench. That's me. Zach for short."

"Oh."

Willie stared at their silent silhouettes in the darkness for what seemed an eternity. He could hear only the sound of Sam's tongue lathering Tom's face and a gentle breeze gliding through the trees.

"Best come in," said Tom at last.

They clattered into the hallway. Tom put the blacks up in the front room, crashed around in the darkness and lit the gas and oil lamps. After he had made a pot of tea, they sat near the stove and surveyed each other. Willie's face, hair and clothes were covered with earth. His filthy hands showed up starkly against the white mug he was holding. Zach, Tom discovered, was a voluble, curly-haired boy a few months older than Willie, only taller and in bad need, so he thought, of a haircut. A red jersey was draped around his bare shoulders, and a pair of frayed, rather colorful men's braces held up some well-darned green shorts. Apart from his sandals, his legs were bare.

"You finished the shelter then?" said Tom.

Willie nodded and glanced in Zach's direction. "He helped."

"By the feel of it, you done a good job. How'd you reach the top?"

There was a pause.

"Wiv the ladder," said Willie huskily.

"Yes," interspersed Zach, "that was my idea."

"Oh, was it now?"

"Yes."

"You put it back then?"

"Oh yes. It might be a bit earth stained, though."

Tom poked some tobacco into his pipe and relit it. "Where you stayin' then? You ent from round here."

"With Dr. and Mrs. Little. I've been here for about a week now."

"Oh," said Tom. "I haven't seen you around."

"I haven't seen you around either," said Zach.

Willie choked on a mouthful of tea and Zach slapped his back. He flinched. His skin was still bruised and sore.

"I say," blurted out Zach with concern, "you're not one of those delicate mortals, are you?"

"No, he ent," said Torn sharply. "Leastways, not for long."

Zach glanced at the clock on the bookcase and stood up. "I say," he exclaimed, "it's nine o'clock. Thanks awfully for the tea, Mr. Oakley. May I come round tomorrow and see Will?"

"Up to William, ask him."

Willie was so exhausted from the day's labors that he didn't know whether he had dreamed the last remark or not.

"Can I?" said Zach earnestly. "I've a marvelous idea for a game."

"Yeh."

"Wizard! Callooh! Callay!"

With a great effort he attempted to pull his jersey on over his head. He tugged and pulled at it until it eventually moved over his nose and ears, causing his hair to spring up in all directions like soft wire.

"Phew!" he gasped. "I did it. Mother says I mustn't grow any more till she's collected enough wool to knit me a bigger one." He tugged the sleeves of the jersey down but they slid stubbornly back to between his wrists and elbows.

"Good night, Sam," he said, giving him a pat.

"William," said Tom, "see yer friend out."

Willie got sleepily to his feet and followed Zach into the hall, closing the door behind him.

"Ow!" cried Zach as his knee hit the stepladder. Willie opened the front door. The sky was still starry and a cool breeze shook the grass between the gravestones. He shivered.

"Your jersey's awfully damp," said Zach, feeling it. "Don't go catching pneumonia." He glanced cautiously round the graveyard. "Just looking for spies," he explained. "Look, about my idea. You know Captain McBlaid?"

"D'you mean Charlie Ruddles?"

"No," said Zach excitedly, "Captain McBlaid of the Air Police."

"Is he the prime minister or somethin'?"

"No!" He took another look around. "I'll tell you more about it tomorrow. Roger, wilco and out."

Willie watched him walk down the path and towards the church, then pull himself up over the

wall and disappear. Who was Roger Wilco and what did he mean by out? he thought. He stepped back into the hall and felt his way back to the living room.

In front of the stove stood the large copper tub. Tom was pouring hot water into it while Sam was hiding under the table and eyeing it suspiciously.

"Don't worry, Sam. It ent fer you."

He looked down at Willie. "You'll be stiff tomorrer. Best have a good soak."

Willie stared in horror at the bubbling water and backed towards the table. He watched Tom lift two more saucepans from the stove and empty them together with a handful of salt into the tub.

"Come on then," he said.

"Is it fer me clothes, Mister Tom?"

"It's fer you,"

Willie swallowed. "Please, mister. I can't swim. I'll drown."

"Ent you never . . ." But he stopped himself. It was a stupid question. "You don't put yer head under. You sit in it, washes yerself and has a little lean back."

It took some time before Willie allowed himself to relax in the water. Tom handed him a large square bar of soap and showed him how to use it. He then proceeded to wash Willie's hair several times with such vigor that Willie thought his head would fall off. A drop of soap trickled into his eyes and he rubbed it, only to find that he had created more pain.

After this ordeal Tom left him to have a soak, and slowly Willie began to unwind. He held on to the sides of the tub and let his legs float gently to the surface. The gas lamp flickered and spluttered above him, sending moving shadows across the walls.

He gave a start, for he had been so relaxed that he had nearly fallen asleep. Tom handed him a towel, and after he had dried himself and had his hair rubbed and combed and had put his pyjamas on, he sat down on the pouffe by the armchair while Tom sat ready to tell him a story. Sam spread himself out on the rug between them.

"I'm goin' to look at the story first and then tells it in me own way, like I done with Noah. That suit you?"

Willie nodded and hugged his knees.

"This is the story of how God created the world."

And he began to talk about the light and the darkness, the coming of the sky and the sea, the fish and the animals and of Adam and Eve. After this he made them both some cocoa and began the first of the *Just So* stories.

"I haven't read these for years," he said, leaning over to Willie. "Come and look at these pictures."

Willie rested against the arm of the armchair and listened to "How the Whale got his Throat."

This was a slow process, for Tom had to keep stopping to explain what the words meant, and several times had to look them up in a dictionary.

Willie lay in bed that night, tired and aching, but the aches were very pleasant ones and as he slept he dreamed that Adam and Eve were being chased by a large whale and that he stood in the garden of Eden wondering if God was nubby and ate infinite sauce and sagacity.