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Opening extract from

Araminta Spook
Frognapped

Written by

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"Araminta, where have you put my frogs?" What kind of question is that? But last week that is exactly what Barry Wizzard asked me.

I did not answer.

I did not answer because when someone in Spook House has lost something they always say, "Araminta, where have you put my . . . ?" You can fill in the blank with anything you like

and chances are, someone will have thought that I put it somewhere. I do not know why.

Take yesterday, for instance. Wanda Wizzard, who lives with me in Spook House—along with her parents, Barry and Brenda, and my Aunt Tabitha and Uncle Drac - asked me where I had put her green socks. Wanda is supposed to be my best friend, although you'd never believe it from the way she talks to me. So I asked Wanda why she thought I would want to even *touch* her smelly old green socks, let alone put them somewhere, and she just smiled the irritating smile that she has learned from my Aunt Tabby and said, "How do *I* know, Araminta?" So I told her they were in the compost heap at the bottom of the garden. She came back hours later with eggshells and mouldy carrot

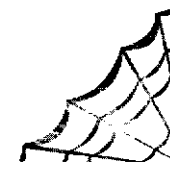
tops in her hair and she didn't ask again.

But Barry did ask again. "Araminta," he said, sounding snappy.

"Yes, Barry?" I replied politely, even though I just knew what he was going to say. Which he did.

"Where have you *put my frogs*?"

It was very trying. Wanda and I were busy, we had things to do. Wanda was building a house to put some small spiders in so they did not get eaten by the big spiders. And because that was unfair to the big spiders, I was building a house for *them*. Building a spider house is not easy, but Barry did not care because Barry thinks only about his frogs. They are acrobatic frogs, which means they do lots of tricks, like jumping over each other and doing summersaults.



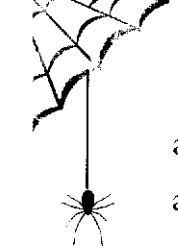


And, they can do a frog pyramid, which I suppose is all right if you like that sort of thing. Barry has – or rather Barry *had*– five frogs, and he had names for them all, but I can't remember them as they were silly frog names like Ermintrude and Gonzilla.

Barry stood right in front of me, tapping his pointy blue shoes like he was waiting for someone who was late. "It's not funny any more, Araminta," he said.

I finished gluing the roof on to the spider house and then I made sure that I looked like I was thinking very carefully about what Barry had said. "I did not think it was funny in the first place actually, Barry," I said. "I have better things to do than put a load of stupid frogs *anywhere*."

"You haven't put them in the bath again



and let the water out, have you, Araminta?" he asked.

"No, I haven't. Anyway, it wasn't me who took the plug out. It was Aunt Tabby. I was just giving them a nice swim."

"The water was hot, Araminta."

"I was only trying to warm them up. They looked cold."

"They looked even colder when I fished them out of the plughole, Araminta."

Have you noticed that when someone is cross with you they keep saying your whole name? It is a real giveaway. Aunt Tabby can say as many times as she likes, "No, I am not cross with you, Araminta, I am just disappointed, that is all." But I know she is annoyed because of the "Araminta" part. My Uncle Drac always calls me Minty and he is

never cross with me, so that proves it.

I could see that Barry was not going to believe me about the frogs, so when Wanda said, "We'll go and look for them if you like, Dad. Won't we, Araminta?" I thought I had better say "Yes, Wanda" and smile like I was very keen to do it.

Barry and Wanda both looked at me in a suspicious way, but there is no pleasing some people.

Spook House is a huge house. I do not know how many rooms there are because whenever I start counting I am sure that some of them move around, just to annoy me, so that I either count them twice or not at all. Then there are the secret rooms, and I only know one of those, because obviously the rest of

them are secret. The secret room that I do know about is in the middle of the house at the end of a secret tunnel and it belongs to Sir Horace, who is one of our ghosts.

So you can see that it was not easy to look for frogs in such a big place. Plus lots of the rooms are full of what Uncle Drac calls junk, but what Aunt Tabby calls "finds"—which means she has found a load of old furniture, I do not know where. Then you can add the piles of spiders' webs that are stuffed full of enormous spiders, which could probably eat all Barry's frogs for breakfast and still be hungry, and you can see that I did not expect to find any of Barry's frogs in Spook House.

I was right. We didn't.

But we did find:



- one wellington boot with a family of mice living in it
- one elephant's-foot doorstop (I do not know where the rest of the elephant was)
- six pairs of Aunt Tabby's spectacles huddling together in a dark corner behind some mouldy curtains on the landing, hoping not to be found
- one box of odd knitting needles
- five bolts from Sir Horace's helmet.

And then Aunt Tabby found *us*.

My Aunt Tabby is always creeping around the house trying to catch me and Wanda doing something that she thinks we shouldn't. But she didn't have to creep around to find us this time, because Wanda was yelling so loudly that it was a bit of a giveaway.

We were right at the top of the house in a little turret opposite Uncle Drac's bat turret. Wanda had a telescope that Brenda and Barry had given her for her birthday, and I thought it would be a good place to go to look for the frogs because you can see for miles out of the window. But it is hard to see frogs, even through a telescope. So I told Wanda that she might see more if she climbed on top of one of Aunt Tabby's "finds"—a horrible old wardrobe right by the window. Wanda is not very good at climbing, but I helped her up, and I was just about to pass her the telescope when there was a loud *crack* and she disappeared. Well, most of her did. I could still see her head sticking out, which looked quite funny, although Wanda didn't seem to think it was.

Then she started yelling. When Wanda yells, you have to put your fingers in your ears or your eardrums will explode.

"Be quiet, Wanda," I told her. "You'll frighten the frogs if they're here. Then they'll all hop off and we'll never find them."





"I don't care about the stupid frogs," Wanda yelled. "Get me out of here!"

I was shocked. "Wanda," I said, "Barry would be very upset to hear you call his frogs stupid."

"Well, you do all the time. Get me *out*! Help, help!" Suddenly there was a thump and Wanda's head disappeared. Now she was right inside the wardrobe.

"Help!" yelled Wanda. "*Heeelp*!"

I tried to open the door, but it was locked and there was no key. I pulled on the door handle and it came right off in my hand.

In between Wanda's yells I could hear Aunt Tabby's footsteps clattering up the stairs from the hall and then thumping up the winding backstairs to the little room in the turret roof. She threw open the door and a hat stand

fell over and landed on her foot. Aunt Tabby did not look pleased. Her hair was sticking up like it does when she is cross and her spectacles were about to make a break for freedom and join their friends by the mouldy curtains on the landing.

"What *are* you doing in here, Araminta?" she said.

"Wanda's in here too," I told her, because I am tired of always getting the blame.

"Where?" asked Aunt Tabby suspiciously.

"In the wardrobe."

"Help!" shouted Wanda, sounding sort of muffled.

Aunt Tabby sighed. "Brenda!" she yelled out of the door. "Brendaaaa. Wanda's stuck again."





It took for ever to get Wanda out. In the end Aunt Tabby had to get her crowbar to open the wardrobe door. She was not happy because the door split in two. Brenda was not pleased either, because when Wanda fell out of the wardrobe she was covered in dust and had scraped her knees. And they both blamed *me*.

We had to promise never, ever to climb on wardrobes again, even though I pointed out that I never had, so if I did, it would not be *again*, it would be for the first time. Aunt Tabby was just about to say something when the doorbell rang downstairs and Brenda and Aunt Tabby both rushed off to get it. Aunt Tabby always likes to be the first one to answer the door because she is so nosy, but Brenda, who is just as nosy, is a surprisingly

fast runner and can beat Aunt Tabby down the stairs any day.

Wanda and I listened to their footsteps disappearing. I waited for Wanda to start moaning at me, but she didn't. "While I was in the wardrobe I was thinking," she said.

"No you weren't, you were yelling," I pointed out.

"Actually, Araminta, it is perfectly possible to yell and think at the same time," Wanda said sniffily. "I was thinking about the frogs. Now I know what's happened to them."

I didn't get it. "How? Have they written a note and left it in the wardrobe?"

Wanda sighed like she was pretending to be patient. "Frogs can't write, Araminta. But they do leave clues. Little sticky frog footprints. And have we seen any?"

I shook my head.

"Exactly," said Wanda, sounding like she was some kind of detective. "Which can mean only one thing."

"Can it?" I asked.

Wanda glanced around as if she was expecting Aunt Tabby to jump out from one of the other horrible wardrobes. Then she whispered, "Dad's frogs have been *frog-napped*."