

# THE BLACK HEART CRYPT

## Chapter One

Zack Jennings did not want to chase a slobbering black dog with glowing red eyeballs up into the Haddam Hill Cemetery three nights before Halloween. It was Zipper's idea.

They were in the backyard after dinner, playing with a squishy yellow ball, when Zipper picked up the other dog's scent and went tearing down the highway after it.

"Zipper? Halt! Stay! Come!"

Zack wasn't exactly sure which command to use to stop his dog from chasing after the thundering black beast that had to be some kind of hell hound, otherwise its eyes wouldn't be a pair of red hot coals.

But Zipper did not stay, halt, or come. The small dog slipped through the cemetery's wrought iron railings to pursue the monster with so many rippling muscles Zack figured it must belong to the Gym For Gigantic Dogs.

Of course he couldn't squeeze between the railings like Zipper had and he wasn't much at scaling fences, especially when his glasses got all foggy, so he dashed around to the back of the cemetery where he knew there was a gate because one night, back in June, he and his friend Davy had hidden in this very same cemetery to escape a knife-wielding nutjob whose body was being controlled by an evil ancestor.

A *dead* evil ancestor.

Yep. Ghosts can do that. They can slip their souls into the bodies of family members and totally take them over.

Zack yanked open the gate and shuffled through the sea of leaves smothering the ground between tombstones. A chilly autumn nip was in the air. The moon was hidden behind a pile of angry dark clouds. The sky was a murky black. Three nights before Halloween, this cemetery was creepier than ever.

"Zipper?" Zack's voice echoed off a marble monument. "Where are you boy?"

Finally, his dog barked a quick volley of "Yaps" to let Zack know he was extremely busy.

Then Zack heard a deep, throaty rumble. The demon dog!

"Hang on, Zip! I'm coming!"

Zack swung around a concrete angel and raced over to a tomb the size of a small cabin; the biggest, darkest mausoleum in the whole Haddam Hill cemetery.

Its arched wooden doorway was sealed tight with a black heart-shaped lock. Even in the gloom of night, Zack could read the name carved into the stone slab over the entryway:

*I C K L E B Y*

"Zipper?" No answer.

Zack trotted around the stone building, which sort of looked like a miniature church made out of gray Lego blocks.

"Zipper?"

He heard a weird whimper that sounded like a weary sheep bleat.

"Zip?"

His dog came padding around the corner of the blockhouse with a bewildered grin on his snout.

"The big black dog disappeared on you, didn't he, boy?"

Zipper wagged his tail excitedly as if to say, *"Yeah, yeah. It was freaky."*

Zack bent down to rub his buddy's head.

"Well, maybe next time you'll listen to me when I tell you not to chase after devil dogs."

Zipper leapt up to lick Zack's face. Zack laughed.

That is, he laughed until he heard the sharp slice of a shovel blade digging into dirt.

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## Chapter Two

Someone else was in the cemetery.

Zipper hunkered down on the ground in pounce mode.

Zack pressed his back against the Ickleby family crypt in an attempt to disappear into the shadows.

Sticky cobwebs attacked the back of his head, making him feel like he'd just brushed up against a giant wad of cotton candy. Peeling away the gooey strands, Zack peered over at a cluster of grime-streaked headstones where he saw a burly man with a bushy beard, who was dressed in coveralls, sinking his shovel blade into the ground, digging up rocky clumps of dirt. A softly glowing lantern,

propped atop a nearby headstone, projected his hulking shadow up into the tangled tree branches where it loomed like a floating ogre.

Fortunately, the guy wasn't a ghost. Zack could tell. Ever since he'd moved to Connecticut from New York City with his dad and stepmom, he'd learned a whole bunch of junk about the spirit world, what ghosts can do and what they can't. He probably knew more than any eleven-year-old should legally be allowed to.

For instance, he knew a ghost could take over the body of a blood relative but, unless they did that, they couldn't do much besides wail and moan and try to scare you into hurting yourself.

A ghost couldn't hold a shovel and, in Zack's experience, digging a hole in the ground by lantern light wasn't exactly something an evil spirit took over a relative's body to do. He felt pretty confident that the dude digging the hole wasn't a ghost or a possessed person.

The man started singing as he dug, a tune Zack recognized from recess on the playground:

*"Don't ever laugh when a hearse goes by  
For you may be the next to die."*

Zack looked at Zipper and put a finger to his lips. They would try to tiptoe out of the graveyard without being seen or heard.

*"The worms crawl in, the worms crawl out  
The worms play Pinochle on your snout."*

Zack and Zipper crept closer to the gate. The bearded man kept digging, kept up his steady stomp-slice-shook-flump, stomp-slice-shook-flump.

*"There's one little worm that's very shy  
Crawls in your stomach and out your eye."*

Zack and Zipper made it to the graveyard gate.

The digging stopped.

"Isn't that right boy?"

Okay. Zack didn't remember those lyrics. He pushed open the squeaky gate.

"Freeze!" the gravedigger shouted.

Zack froze.

And, this time, Zipper obeyed, too!

### Chapter Three

Somewhere in the distance, Zack heard a stray cat meowing at the moon. Then he heard boots clomping up behind him.

"I heard you callin' to your dog, boy," said the man who kept coming closer. "Zipper. What kind of name is that for a dog?"

Slowly, Zack turned around.

The bearded man was standing six feet behind him, holding his clay-draggled shovel like a knight's lance with one hand, the flickering lantern with the other.

"Well," said Zack, wishing his throat wasn't so dry, "Zipper is very fast and...."

"Dogs ought to be named Fido, Duke, Sparky. What you two doin' here, anyway? Cemetery's closed."

"Um," said Zack, "Zipper chased a cat up the hill from the highway."

"A cat?" The creepy gravedigger raised the lantern up beside his craggy face. "You sure it weren't a dog? A big black dog?"

Zack gulped. "Pardon?"

The gravedigger bugged out his eyes. "A big black dog with fiery red eyeballs. What some folks call a Black Shuck; a ghostly black beast what guards graveyards from foul spirits." The man grinned menacingly. "Wonder why he let you two in?"

"It was just a cat," said Zack.

The stray cat yowled again. Its strangled cry sounded like a baby screaming for its bottle.

"Well, we better get going."

"Yep. You should. Ain't very wise to be in a boneyard this close to Halloween unless, of course, you've got some serious business to attend to, such as digging a new grave."

Zack was scared but also confused so he said, "Huh?"

The gravedigger nodded toward the hole he'd been scooping out. "Mr. Henry H. Heckman has arrived just in time for Halloween when he'll crawl up out of the ground to go take care of whatever business he left undone when he died."

"Heckman?"

"That's what I said, boy. Putting him in the family plot. There's all sorts of Heckmans buried up here on Haddam Hill."

*Yeah*, Zack wanted to say. He had met one of them back in June: a dead bus driver named Bud Heckman.

"Yep," the gravedigger went on, "Heckmans have lived and died in these parts since before the Revolutionary War."

"Just like the Icklebys huh?"

The gravedigger lost his sly smile. "Icklebys ain't from around here, boy."

"Really? I saw their name on that big tomb over there so I figured..."

"Icklebys don't belong here and neither do you two! Git!"

Zipper snarled.

The gravedigger raised his shovel. "Git!"

"We're 'gitting,'" said Zack.

"Good! And don't never come back here no more!"

"Don't worry," said Zack. "We won't."

Because a graveyard was the last place Zack Jennings wanted to be this close to Halloween.

Too many worm-eaten ghosts with Pinochle cards up their snouts.