

THE CROSSROADS

Prologue

Have you ever seen a face hidden in the bark of a tree and known that the man trapped inside wanted to hurt you?

That's what Zack Jennings had always wanted to ask his father but he never did because he was afraid his dad would think he was just letting his imagination run wild again.

Except this time Zack was pretty certain he had seen a man's face hidden inside this huge, gnarly tree over in the small park ringing the American Museum of Natural History.

Other kids might've seen lumpy bumps and knotholes. Zack saw angry eyes and a snarling mouth.

But Zack never did ask his father. Instead, he asked Mrs. Donna Schlampp, the librarian at his school, if she thought reincarnation extended to plants as well as animals. Could people come back as a tree or just as cows or some kind of bug? Mrs. Schlampp (who had a graduate degree in Comparative Theology but never got to use it except at dinner parties) said that, yes, some religions believed tormented souls could become trapped inside the elements of nature - most especially trees.

So, according to one adult who'd been to college, the oak in the park could, indeed, have an anguished soul trapped beneath its bark.

Thanks a bunch, Mrs. Schlampp.

Fortunately, Zack and his dad were leaving New York City pretty soon. They were moving up to Connecticut right after his dad got married again.

That tree in the park? It wasn't coming with them.

But maybe Mrs. Schlampp could go visit it from time to time.

Chapter One

Billy O'Claire was doggy-dog tired.

He'd been trying to fix the toilet in the brand new house for over six hours and the weather outside was extremely hot and muggy, especially for the Friday before Memorial Day.

Billy was sweating up a storm. Since nobody lived in the new house yet, they hadn't turned on the air conditioning. His work shirt was a sopping sheet of wet

cotton with full-moon stains oozing down below both armpits.

It was 9 p.m.

He tightened one last nut then gave the trip handle on the toilet a flick. Instead of the customary whoosh of water swirling into the bowl, Billy heard a roaring gurgle. The toilet was working backwards. He raised the lid and saw a commode burping up chunks of brown gunk. Leaves. Dirt. Twigs.

Nothing else, thank heaven, because nobody had actually used the toilet yet. This woody debris had to be seeping in from a cracked sewer line and Billy realized they might have to rip up the newly-sodded lawn to fix a drainpipe ruptured, most likely, by tree roots.

But, that was a Monday-morning kind of problem.

Fortunately it was Friday night and Billy was finished working for the week. He cranked the shutoff valve behind the toilet and went out to the driveway, where he had parked his pickup, the one with "O'Claire's Plumbing" painted on the door over where it used to say "O'Claire's Painting" and, before that, "O'Claire's Satellite Television Repair."

Billy sat in the cab and drank half a gallon of water out of a glugging plastic jug and aimed two of the truck's air conditioning vents up at his armpits.

It felt good.

Real good. He yawned and thought about grabbing a quick nap. Instead, he slammed the transmission into reverse and backed out of the driveway, not realizing that something wicked was lurking a little ways down the road—just waiting for the next doggy-dog tired driver to come along.

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A flashing red stoplight hung suspended over the intersection where County Route 13 crossed Connecticut State Highway 31.

A gigantic oak tree stood near one corner, and its highest branch—as thick around as the trunk of any ordinary tree—suddenly started to move. No wind was blowing. No sports car zooming past had sent up a swirling wake. But the massive limb began to bend and rotate. It sensed an easy target approaching and, longing for a little fun, tore against itself—slowly at first, then with gathering speed. When the final strands ripped free, the bough broke off and fell like a two-ton truck, tearing down the blinking beacon.

Then the tree stopped moving.

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Billy O'Claire remembered that there used to be a flashing red stoplight hanging

over the intersection of 13 and 31. Tonight, however, there wasn't one.

Good.

Billy didn't want to stop. He needed to find a bathroom. Bad. Chugging half a gallon of water straight from the jug will do that to you. And he preferred a bathroom where the toilet didn't gurgle back at him. He pressed down on the gas pedal.

"How dry I am," he crooned off-key. "How wet I'll be, if I don't find...."

Suddenly, he saw someone standing in the middle of the road.

A cop.

A motorcycle cop—holding up his hand and commanding Billy to stop.

So Billy slammed on his brakes and the pickup skidded sideways. Tires screeched, the truck swerved, and he almost hooked onto the bumper of a car he hadn't even seen coming. He spun around and wound up on the far side of the intersection - backwards and straddling a ditch.

Billy wasn't injured, just totally dazed. He could see the taillights of the car he had nearly hit as it zoomed up the highway. Glancing at his rearview mirror, he saw the cop standing next to his motorbike, which was very weird looking—had a moonfaced headlight and chrome fenders swooping up over its tires.

It's from the 1950s, Billy thought. An old Harley Softail. Billy liked old motorcycles. Wished he had one right now so he could hightail it out of here before the cop came over and started hassling him. Then Billy realized: the cop's uniform and hat looked old-fashioned, too.

It looks like he's from some black-and-white movie. One of those old monster movies where the police try to capture Godzilla.

The cop marched slowly toward the truck. Billy strained to see if it was anybody he knew, thinking this was some kind of practical joke. He tried to see the cop's face.

Only the cop didn't have one.

He had a crew cut and mirrored sunglasses and ears but no face!

Billy jerked up on his door handle hard. When it wouldn't budge, he kicked the door open. He screamed once and scrambled out of the truck and ran as fast as he could up the highway.

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The police officer didn't care about Billy O'Claire. Didn't chase after him.

His job was done for the night. He had prevented a horrible, possibly fatal, collision.

Something he had tried to do once before.

June 21, 1958.

The day he had died.

Chapter Two

On the morning of his father's second wedding, Zack Jennings stood in a tuxedo on the mound of Shea Stadium, the first eleven-year-old to ever pitch for the New York Mets.

There were moving-boxes set up in a diamond around the empty living room. "Blankets and Pillows" was first base. "Kitchen Stuff" was second. "Books" third. A heavy cardboard china box was home plate because it had dishes in it. Dishes and plates.

Zack checked the signals from the catcher, shook his head. No way was he throwing a slider. Not with two outs in the bottom of the ninth, a full count, and imaginary men on first, second, and third. The bases were loaded.

"It all comes down to this one pitch," Zack said, narrating the scene. "He looks to the dugout." Zack glanced over at the stuffed animals lined up along the baseboard.

He looked to his coach and the grizzled bear gave him the signal: throw whatever you think is best, kid.

Zack nodded. He understood. The old ball coach was giving him the game. It was Zack's to win or lose.

He pushed his eyeglasses up his nose. Some players laughed at any pitcher who wore his spectacles out on the mound. That is, they laughed until they saw Zack hurl his famous firebomb fandango fastball. Then they realized that the glasses were what gave Zack Jennings his supersonic-vision, enabling him to place pitches precisely over that portion of the plate where no batter could possibly hit them.

Zack squeezed the spongy ball in his right fist. He glanced toward third, making sure the imaginary man wasn't taking too much of a lead. He raised his left leg.

"Here's the windup and the pitch. He's going with the fastball!"

Zack shifted into super slo-mo and added sound effects: the zoom of the ball

leaving his hand, fifty thousand fans rising to their feet, the jet stream of his fastball streaking past the baffled batter.

"Stee-rike three!" Zack the umpire yelled. "You're outta here!"

Zack did a funky potato masher dance while the rest of his imaginary teammates stormed out of the dugout to mob him. He dropped to his knees, flopped sideways on the floor, and started spinning around in kicking circles.

"Zack Jennings wins the World Series! He wins the World Series!!"

Stop that!

Zack froze. His eyes darted around the empty room.

"Mom?"

He thought he heard her, knew it was impossible.

"Mom?"

Zack stood, brushed off his pants, backed away from the archway where the living room connected to the dining room. He turned and faced a bay window. He looked across the street. The brownstone on the other side of West 84th Street. She was over there waiting for him, right above the front door—the monster with the sunken stone eyes.

"Wherever you go, whatever you do, I'll know," his mother had always told him. "I have eyes everywhere!"

A gargoyle. Logically, rationally, Zack knew that's all the monster across the street was. It wasn't alive and it certainly couldn't see. It was a figment of some stonemason's wild imagination. This one depicted a sad-faced lady with hair that grew into a thorny tangle of branches and leaves, what they called a Green Lady, half-human, half-tree. Her wide-open eyes were, in reality, deep holes bored with a mason's drill. But the irrational part of Zack's brain told him that The Stone Lady had seen him rolling around on the floor in his wedding clothes. She knew Zack had ruined another day for everybody else because he was so silly, so selfish. And The Stone Lady always reported everything to his mother.

"Mom?"

Zack and his dad had a big apartment for New York. Three bedrooms. A living room, kitchen, and dining room. Two-and-a-half baths. The dining room was the only room in the whole apartment that terrified Zack.

The room right in front of him.

From the Living Room you step into the Dining Room - also known as the Dying Room.

It was empty. No boxes. No furniture. Nothing but the same stale smell: a dozen wet ashtrays leaching out of the walls.

Zack felt his heart race, felt it try to jump out of his chest and gallop down the hall so it could hide underneath his bed and tremble in the darkness. But there was no bed in the bedroom anymore. The moving men broke it down and wrapped the frame pieces together with strapping tape so they could haul it up to Connecticut. Zack's heart would have to stay with him and face whatever was in The Dying Room.

"Mom?" Zack whispered. "I'm sorry, mom."

His voice rang off walls where nothing remained except the cigarette smoke-stained outlines of picture frames. But, sometimes, Zack thought he could still see her—sick and swallowed up by the tilting bed. Skinny as a skeleton, bald from all the chemotherapy the cancer doctors had given her.

"I didn't even get all that dirty, honest..."

Liar!

"I didn't mean to..."

You're the reason I left. You're why I can't live with your father anymore. You're why I died. I had to leave so I could get away from you.

"I'm sorry mom."

The dining room had been empty for over a year. He and his father hardly ever came in here. Not since the medical equipment company came and took away the hospital bed and the rolling medicine cabinet and the IV poles and the suction machine and the steel-framed commode chair. Not since the night nurse took all the medicine bottles and flushed the pills and painkillers down the toilet. Not since the night his mother died.

"Zack?" His father was standing behind him. "What's up?"

"Nothing."

He placed a hand on Zack's shoulder.

"You okay?"

"Yeah. Fine."

"You miss her, huh?"

Zack knew he needed to choose his words very carefully.

"Yes, dad. I miss mom."

"Me, too. But, well, we talked about this, remember?"

"Yes, sir."

His father tousled Zack's hair. He had given the correct answer—he'd be back to play again tomorrow.

"Where's your tie?"

Zack pulled a clip-on bow tie out of his tuxedo jacket. It was purple, his new stepmother's favorite color.

"Hey, how'd your tux get so dirty?" His father swiped some lint off Zack's back. "You don't want to spoil our big day, do you?"

"No, sir."

"Great. Well, I guess we shouldn't keep everybody waiting...."

His father smiled, Zack pretended to smile back and the two of them marched out of the apartment.

Zack knew his father was excited, eager to start his brand new life.

Zack also knew that, given half a chance, he'd probably ruin this one for his dad, too.