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# JOHN SAUL

Author of  
*Midnight Voices*

BLACK  
CREEK CROSSING

A NOVEL



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A NOVEL

JOHN  
SAUL



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# Prologue

T WAS THE COLD THAT AWAKENED HER, A COLD THAT crept first into her sleep, curling its fingers around her subconscious, making her feel as if she were walking through the woods on a winter night. Snow crunched beneath her feet, and all around her the bare limbs of trees glistened in the moonlight, every branch and twig encased in ice that sparkled with a brilliance that seemed to mirror the millions of stars that twinkled in the clear night sky. The path wound through a stand of birches, and she was striding along with the careless exhilaration of a spring afternoon rather than the sense of purposeful urgency that winter nights always brought.

Then, as the cold tightened its grip, the dream began to change.

A cloud scudded across the moon, and the stars began to fade.

The woman instinctively reached to pull her shawl tighter around her throat and shoulders, but all her fingers closed on was the thin flannel of her nightgown.

Why wasn't she dressed?

She hurried her step, and only now realized she was barefoot and the cold of the snow was numbing her toes.

She quickened her pace again, intent on reaching home



before frostbite began eating at her flesh, but now the path seemed to be vanishing from beneath her feet. She paused, peering through the darkness to find the trail once more, but suddenly everything had changed.

The moonlight had disappeared, and the stars were gone.

The trees, every branch glittering with light only a moment ago, were etched against the clouds in a black even darker than the sky itself, and their limbs, which had thrust upward in celebration, now loomed over her, their branches reaching toward her, their twigs turning to skeletal fingers straining to scratch her flesh.

Searching for the vanished path, she looked first in one direction, then in another. But everywhere she looked the snow was unbroken, as if she'd been dropped from nowhere into this dark and freezing wilderness.

Her heart pounded and she felt a wave of panic rise within her.

But why?

There was nothing to be afraid of—she'd been in the woods a hundred times and had never been frightened.

But somehow this night was different than all the others, the darkness blacker, the winter chill colder, cutting through her nightgown as if the flannel weren't there at all.

As the wave of panic built, a cry rose in her throat. She opened her mouth, but nothing came out but a gasp so faint she herself could barely hear it, and as she tried to find her voice, her throat and chest constricted until she could barely breathe.

She tried to run then, but her feet seemed mired in the snow, as if it had turned into the thick muck of the marsh behind the house.

The cold tightened its grip, and she shivered, her whole body trembling, and once again her fingers reached toward



her breast to pull the flannel of her nightgown more closely around her.

The nightgown was gone! She was naked!

And she was no longer alone . . .

Somewhere in the darkness, somewhere just beyond the limits of her vision, there was something.

Something that was hunting.

Hunting for her.

Another cry rose in her throat, but this time she held it back deliberately, keeping it in check by the sheer force of her own will.

And finally, though the cold was now threatening to numb her body as the snow had numbed her feet, she began to run.

Too late. Everything was closing in on her—the cold was reaching into her bones, the snow was sucking at her feet, the blackness of the night was all but complete. And the trees themselves were reaching out, scratching at her skin, lashing at her arms, her back, her thighs, her breasts.

She sank to her knees, sobbing, and was reaching out—stretching her arms as if in supplication—when a blow from behind struck her.

Searing pain shot through her, and she pitched forward, sprawling out, and at last a scream erupted from her throat.

And she woke up.

For a moment she lay still on her stomach, gasping for breath, trying to shake the last of the nightmare from her still-reeling mind.

The memory of the forest began to fade, and the grasping limbs and twigs of the trees retreated.



The snow was gone, and she felt only the bedsheet beneath her.

Yet the cold still gripped her. And the pain in her back, instead of fading away, was growing worse. She turned her head to one side and the sense that she was not alone was stronger than ever . . .

*I'm asleep, she told herself. I'm still asleep, and this is only part of the nightmare.*

She lay perfectly still, trying to will the last vestiges of the dream away, as she had willed herself not to scream while still held in the grip of the nightmare's thrall.

Then she heard breathing.

Not the slow and steady breathing of a sleeping bed-mate, nor the heavy breath of a lover.

No, this was the breath of an exultant beast, panting in rapture over its fallen prey, and as she lay on the bed trying to clear her mind and gather her wits, she knew with growing certainty that it was already too late.

The agony spreading through her body told her the predator had already struck.

Now, still lying facedown, she heard a change in the predator's breathing.

Felt it gathering itself together.

Felt it coiling, and knew it was readying itself to strike again.

She had to do something, to throw herself off the bed, to escape from the room, to escape from the house.

Escape from the predator.

Her thoughts were cut off as she felt another blow strike her back, another flash of pain sear her body.

Another scream rose in her throat and erupted into the darkness, and she threw herself over, struggling to flee from the bed and the attacker and the room and the house. But as she twisted around, her eyes locked onto the face that loomed above her.



"No!" she cried. But though she'd screamed as loud as she could, her voice was already reduced to a rattling gasp.

Then, above the face, the knife in the man's hand caught the moonlight, and for a moment that seemed an eternity, it hovered above her, glowing darkly with her own blood.

"No," she said again, the word this time no more than a weak plea, and as it died in the night, the knife began to descend.

She watched it arc toward her, her eyes following the blade as it sank into her breast. For a second she felt nothing more than the heaviness of the blow as the fist that clutched the knife struck her chest. It wasn't until the knife was yanked free of her flesh that the searing heat struck her.

"No . . ." she sighed once more as the knife rose high yet again.

This time she felt nothing as the blade plunged into her, for already her spirit had escaped her body.

For a moment the woman watched from high above, free from the pain, the cold, and the darkness of the night. Again and again the blade flashed down, slashing at the corpse that now lay still upon her bed. But the spirit hovering high above the bed was no longer concerned with the body that had once been hers. Now she thought only of another.

Her daughter . . . her little girl . . . the child she could no longer protect.

*Too late . . . too late . . .*

The eternal darkness swallowed her soul as her husband finished his grisly task . . .







# Chapter 1

**A**S THE LAST BELL OF THE DAY RANG, ANGEL SULLIVAN sat quietly in her seat in the last row of Mr. English's room and waited for her classmates to disappear before she even started stowing her books in her backpack. Finally, when even the chatter in the corridor outside the room had died down, she stood up to pull on her jacket.

"You okay, Angel?" the teacher asked, peering worriedly at her from behind his desk.

*Okay?* she repeated silently to herself. How could she be okay after what had happened this morning? And if Mr. English didn't know what was wrong, how was she going to explain it to him? After all, it had happened right there during the first period, just before the bell sounded, when Mr. English asked the class if they wanted to sing "Happy Birthday" to her. "Happy Birthday," like it was still third grade! Didn't he know that none of her classmates even spoke to her except to say mean things? So there she'd sat, in her seat in the last row, her face burning with embarrassment as a horrible silence fell over the room and half the class turned to stare at her. The only thing that saved her from bursting into tears of humiliation was that the bell had rung. Then everyone rushed for the door.



And now Mr. English wanted to know if she was okay?

Biting her lip but saying nothing, she hurried toward the door and the safety of the corridor beyond, which with any luck would now be empty.

“Angel?”

She heard Mr. English, but was already out of the room, the door swinging shut behind her.

*Angel.* What kind of name was Angel?

For a long time—well, maybe not all that long, but for a while, anyway—she had thought it was a wonderful name, maybe the most wonderful name in the world. Even now, memories of phrases from when she was barely more than a baby echoed softly in her mind.

*Daddy's little Angel.*

*Mommy's little Angel.*

*Grammy's perfect little Angel.*

It had been Grammy who gave her the very first Halloween costume she could remember. It was a white dress that Angel was certain had been made of satin but her mother insisted was only cheap muslin. But it didn't matter, because it had white sequins sewn all over it that glittered even when she was standing as still as she possibly could. On the back of the dress there were two wings Grammy had made of papier-mâché and then covered with white feathers.

“I've been saving them ever since you were born,” Grammy had told her as she carefully fitted the wings onto her tiny three-year-old shoulders. “Some people might tell you they're only seagull feathers, but don't you believe them.”

“But if they didn't come from seagulls, where did they come from?” Angel had asked.

“Angels,” Grammy told her, looking deep into her eyes. “Angels just like you. They come to me when I



dream, and leave feathers on my pillow. Feathers from real angels for my own perfect little Angel."

Angel still had those wings, but they no longer hung on the wall of her room, as they once had. Now they were wrapped in tissue paper and packed away in an old hat box she'd found in the basement of the house they lived in when she was nine, and even though her mother thought they should be thrown away, Angel knew they never would be. They were all she had to remind her of Grammy, who died a little while after that wonderful Halloween when she'd worn the angel costume, and Grammy held her hand and led her up to the porches decorated with jack-o'-lanterns. Angel remembered being too shy to knock on the doors herself, and too terrified of the strangers who answered the doors to call out "Trick or treat," so Grammy had done that for her too.

Then, even before all her Halloween candy was gone, Grammy had died.

And she had been alone ever since, with only the wonderful feathered wings to remember her grandmother by.

After Grammy died, she'd still been "Mommy's little Angel" and "Daddy's little Angel" for a while, and wore an angel costume on every Halloween, but it wasn't the same. Finally, as if they understood that she wasn't anything like a "little Angel," her parents stopped calling her that.

The other kids, though—the kids her age—hadn't, and there wasn't a day that went by when someone didn't scream the dreaded phrases at her:

"Hey, Mommy's little Angel—will your wings still get you off the ground?"

"Hey, Daddy's little Angel! Why don't you use your



wings to fly to Heaven? Or don't they want you up there, either?"

The taunts had gone on and on, year after year. Her mother kept telling her it would stop, that the other kids would get tired of teasing her, but it hadn't.

A year ago today, on her fourteenth birthday, when her mother asked her what she wanted, Angel had blurted out the truth: "Another name! I don't look like an angel, and I don't feel like an angel, and I hate the way everyone always teases me." Then she told her mother what she'd been thinking about for months: "I want everyone to start calling me Angie!"

Her mother had at least tried, though no one else did.

Except Nicole Adams. Less than a week after her birthday, Nicole Adams and some of her friends had cornered her in the girls' room. "Don't you know *anything*?" Nicole said, as if talking to a five-year-old. "*Angie* isn't short for *Angel*. It's short for *Angela*! If you want it to be short for Angel, it should be *Ane-gey*, with a long A." Nicole's lips had twisted into a mean-looking smile. "To rhyme with 'mangy.'" Her eyes glittered with malice. "Hey, that's what we'll call you! Mangy-Angey!"

The rest of the girls had all burst out laughing, and though Angel felt like crying, she hadn't. Instead she ducked her head, pushed her way through Nicole's crowd of friends, and fled out into the sunlight of the afternoon.

And now a whole year had gone by, and it was her birthday again, and nothing was any better than it had been before. Except that wasn't quite true, Angel reminded herself. After all, it was fall—her favorite season—when the trees turned glorious colors, and the heavy humidity of the summer gave way to cool days and cold nights. It meant she could start wearing the big bulky sweaters her mom hated but that she loved, be-



cause they covered up at least some of the things that were wrong with her.

It was also that over the summer most of the kids appeared to have lost interest in calling her Mangy-Angey, and had gone back to just ignoring her completely. Or at least they had until Mr. English reminded them that it was her birthday.

But now, as she left Mr. English's room, the hall was as empty as she'd hoped it would be, and if she were lucky, she'd escape from the school before Nicole Adams or any of her friends saw her.

So that wasn't so bad either—if they didn't see her, they wouldn't tease her.

Still, it was her fifteenth birthday, and there wasn't going to be a party, and even though her mother had suggested they go to a movie tonight, she didn't think her mom could afford it, so she'd said no.

Angel was about to push the front door of the school open when she saw Nicole standing on the sidewalk with three of her friends. Quickly, she turned back into the building and ducked into the girls' room.

Empty.

Sighing with relief, she dropped her backpack to the floor, turned on the water, and washed her hands and face, so if anyone came in they'd at least see her doing something. Then, while wiping her hands, she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror.

*Angel*, she silently repeated one more time, regarding her too-large features glumly.

"Don't you worry," her mother had been telling her for almost five years now. "Remember the ugly duckling who turned into a swan? You're my perfect angel, and before you know it, you'll be the most beautiful girl in town."

But now, standing in front of the mirror in the girls'



room, Angel knew it wasn't true. Her eyes bugged out and her nose was too long and her lips were too thick and too wide. Her hair was a lank and lifeless brown, and her body—

Her eyes welled with tears. *Angels are blond and thin and pretty*, she thought. *And I'm not blond, and I'm not thin, and I'm not pretty. All I am is—*

Before she could finish the thought, the door slammed open and she heard Nicole Adams's voice.

"See? Here's Mangy-Angey, hiding in the girls' room, just like she always does. What's wrong, Mangy? How come you wouldn't leave the school? It's your birthday, isn't it? How come you're not having a party? Is it because you're so ugly no one would come?"

Angel froze as Nicole's taunting words poured over her, and for a moment she wanted to grab Nicole's long blond hair and jerk her head right off her neck.

Instead, she did what she always did.

She ducked her head, grabbed her backpack, and pushed through the crowd of girls who had tumbled into the room behind Nicole. A moment later she had escaped from the girls' room, from the school, and from Nicole Adams's taunting voice.

But as she turned the corner at the end of the block and started home, she knew there was one thing she couldn't escape.

No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't escape being who she was.

*It will get better*, she told herself. *Someday, it will get better.*

And someday she'd have a friend—a real friend who would like her just the way she was, just like Grammy had.

Like some kind of silent mantra, she repeated the words to herself over and over again.



*It will get better . . . I'll find a friend . . . it will get better . . . I'll find a friend . . .*

But no matter how many times she repeated the words, Angel Sullivan knew she didn't quite believe them.



## Chapter 2

**M**ARTY SULLIVAN CAST A SIDELONG GLANCE AT THE gleaming Airstream trailer that served as an on-site office for the strip mall that was supposed to have been almost done by now. It was only last week, however, that the framework began to climb above the underground parking lot the town of Eastbury, Massachusetts, had required. Pissant regulations, as far as he was concerned—not that anybody ever listened to him. But since they'd gotten held up on the garage—one of his boss's snafus that he'd tried to blame on him, just like always—there wasn't a chance that they'd get the place framed and closed before the New England winter set in. Which, Marty knew, meant that he and the rest of the crew would be shivering in a couple of more months as much as they'd been sweltering during the summer, when they were stuck down in the pit of the parking garage, setting rebar and pounding forms without a breath of fresh air and the heat in the nineties, with humidity to match. If *he'd* been in charge . . .

But he wasn't in charge, and Jerry O'Donnell—the foreman who'd had it in for Marty since the day he'd signed on to the job last June—wasn't going to listen to anything he had to say. Marty raised the middle finger of his left hand in a sour salute toward the Airstream—