

Flyers

Chapter One

I'll start with the night Rosasharn attacked Ray McPherson's car near the entrance to Blood Red Pond. Not that Rosasharn's dressing up as some kind of creature from the Black Lagoon and hurling himself onto the hood of Ray's old Buick had much to do with what followed, but looking back on it, I realize that was when I got my first small sign that something was going on around there. Something strange. And I don't mean Rosasharn's behavior, which may seem strange to you but was pretty much par for the course for him. I'm talking about the other things, the things that started happening later.

But I'd better backtrack a little here. You're probably wondering why Rosasharn was decked out in a swamp thing costume that night in the first place, and in the second place, what inspired him to ambush Ray and his car the way he did. The costume part is easy enough to explain, but the other -- well, you'd kind of have to know Rosasharn to understand that.

The costume was from a film my friend Bo and I were making as our summer G&T project. G&T stands for Gifted and Talented, although I'm not sure I'm either, and if you were to take a peek at my report card, you wouldn't exactly be thinking Rhodes scholar. Supposedly, though, I have all this untapped potential, and G&T people love nothing more than to get their hands on underachievers. Plus Bo was a definite shoo-in for the G&T program, and I wouldn't be surprised if his mom, who teaches English at the high school, pulled some strings for me. Bo and I had always been a team -- not only in our film projects, but in general as well.

Anyway, Rosasharn had the title spot in our film, which we were calling Green Guy Gets Therapy. We had plenty of time, since the regular school year wasn't even over yet and we wouldn't be turning our project in till fall, but you never know what kinds of problems or delays you might run into on a film. Our last effort, Rogue Nun, still isn't done and I'm not sure it ever will be, at least not as long as Father Ryan is pastor at St. Mary's. He acts nice enough when he sees me, but I can sense a definite difference there since back in March when a few dozen of our extras practically trampled him in the foyer of his own church, and on St. Patrick's day, no less, as he'd pointed out to Pop that night at Willie's. He hadn't been all that keen on letting us use the church for filming in the first place, and no doubt would have nixed the idea from the start if I'd told him the film's title, or that it involved a nun who goes berserk in mass one Sunday morning with a small arsenal she's been building up under her habit since the days when they still said the mass in Latin. I had told him we weren't sure of the title yet, which wasn't an outright lie since we never are sure until we wrap things up, and that it was basically the story of an aging sister who missed the way things used to be. Bo said at the time I should be more up front with the guy, but my thinking had been that the church scenes were just too crucial to risk that kind of reckless honesty. And I still say it would have worked out if Father Ryan had stayed on schedule. Was it my fault he had to come back early from his Saturday hospital rounds in Cambridge and poke his nose in the church just as we were shooting the stampede of parishioners fleeing the wrath of Sister Violet and one of her semi-automatics?

Our Green Guy flick was pretty much in the same vein as the nun thing -- a campy, semi-horror piece, sort of a Lost Boys meets Young Frankenstein. After that sticky business with Father Ryan, I was determined to keep things low-key, this time writing a script that was set in the country and didn't require extras, who, even when they don't mow down a priest, ruin a lot of good shots by laughing and waving at the camera and generally making a pain of themselves.

That night should have been a piece of cake. By eight o'clock we'd pretty much finished setting up camp on a little hill overlooking Blood Red Pond. Bo had taken his video camera down to the water's edge hoping to get some good atmosphere shots of the sunset. I had a decent campfire going and my little brother Ethan had finished making sure we had everything we

needed for the scenes we'd be shooting. You might say Ethan functioned our producer. Even at eleven he had the kind of mind for detail that Bo and I could only dream of having. It'd be just like us to show up for a shoot with no batteries, no videotape, and no camera. Ethan made sure that didn't happen.

"I think we're all set, Gabe," Ethan announced after checking things over one more time. He waited to see if I needed him for anything else, then reached down and fished a comic out of his backpack. The next thing I knew he was face down, propped up on his elbows, and lost in another Superman adventure.

Not long after that, I heard what could only have been Rosasharn's arthritic old Ford dragging itself up the lane toward us. It was probably all in my imagination, but whenever that car pulled up I had the feeling that in addition to all the creaking and rattling and backfiring, I could hear Jeremy and Rosasharn bickering inside. Or I should say Jeremy bickering and Rosasharn coming up with new and original ways of giving him things to bicker about. They were the unlikeliest duo you could ever imagine. Rosasharn was actually Billy Rosa but we'd renamed him in fourth grade after seeing Rosasharn the hillbilly girl in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Our Rosasharn was a good-natured Hoss Cartwright type who couldn't have been more different from the sad-sack *Grapes of Wrath* Rosasharn if he tried, but the name stuck nonetheless. Jeremy was Jeremy Wulfson, a wiry-looking, impatient-acting sort of guy who usually walked around with such a blazing scowl he'd actually developed well-defined muscles in his face. He and Rosasharn had been a team for as long as Bo and I had.

"Greetings, Gabriel Riley, o great writer of swamp epics and creator of killer nuns," Rosasharn said, climbing out of the car and giving me a deep bow.

"Hi, scrub," Jeremy said, and got out too. Right away he started scrounging around the campsite, looking to see what was in the cooler we'd brought and what kinds of things were lying around on the ground. He halted his inspection when he got to Ethan. "Ya reading Tarzan again?" he asked, scowling down at him.

"Superman," Ethan told him, looking up at him with big, serious eyes as if it were the first time Jeremy'd ever asked that question. One time a few years earlier, Jeremy had made the mistake of thinking it was Tarzan comic books that Ethan was always reading, and he'd gotten a charge out of the way Ethan had solemnly explained how it was Superman he liked, not Tarzan. Then Ethan had gone on to explain that while he didn't have anything against Tarzan personally, if you looked at the facts, you'd see that Tarzan was totally different from Superman and really couldn't even be considered in the same league. "Besides," he'd said, delivering what was to him the clincher, "Tarzan can't fly." After that, whenever Jeremy saw Ethan with a comic book, which was pretty often, he'd ask if it was Tarzan.

Jeremy gave a shrug. "Superman, Tarzan -- same difference."

Ethan studied him a minute, and then, probably deciding this wasn't the day he'd finally get through to him, went back to Superman.

A few seconds later, as if to illustrate the point Ethan would have liked to have made, Rosasharn sailed past us on an old Tarzan swing Bo and I had put up years before. We heard about three quarters of a Tarzan yell, then a little snap, and Rosasharn wiped out in the dirt. Something like that is funny enough in itself, but Rosasharn topped it off by lying there clutching the broken rope and giving another Tarzan yell as if he were still flying along at a mile a minute. Ethan looked up and smiled, which was good to see because I often worried that Ethan was a little too serious for a kid his age.

"Maybe you should use public transportation, Rosasharn," I said, reaching down to help him up.

"Maybe he should lose weight," Jeremy added.

I suggested that Rosasharn get into his Green Guy outfit and started down the hill to see how Bo was coming along. Behind me I heard Jeremy give a yelp and turned to see Rosasharn with a long stick and a Three Musketeer pose. "En garde," he said, and did a little fancy footwork.

"Go ahead, ya tub," Jeremy told him, picking up a club-sized piece of wood. "I'll duel ya. I'll duel ya right across the head." He moved in with the chunk of wood until Rosasharn retreated, giving him a Curly-of-the-Three-Stooges wave-off. "I thought so," Jeremy said.

Ethan had looked up from his comic book and was giving another little smile.

"Go back to reading Tarzan," Jeremy told him.

I watched as Bo panned the camera north to south, catching the sunset glinting off the water. Everything down by the pond was so peaceful, as if all of nature were holding its breath. I knew that evening and early morning were Bo's favorite times to be at Blood Red Pond. Mine too, although mornings I'm usually in no mood to appreciate things. Bo and I had practically grown up around that pond. Pop had bought the farmhouse along with the land that bordered the pond before he'd gotten married and moved up from his old stomping grounds in South Troy, which he joked was never quite the same after the last of the Irish breweries went under. And although Mr. Lindstrom, an old widower who owned the land that the pond was on, wasn't exactly crazy about mankind, referring to people in general as "them sons-o-bitches", he took to Pop right away and loved to take him on walking tours showcasing the improvements he was constantly making on his land, one of which was the pond itself. Pop remembers when it was a simple pond in the woods, but when I was still in diapers Mr. Lindstrom bulldozed the outlet so the water would back up and flood the surrounding area. He wanted it to be a sort of nature preserve for ducks and geese and beavers and whatever. There had been an outcry from some of the townspeople at the time because the pond was considered to have some historical significance, supposedly being the site of a brutal Indian massacre way back in the days of the French and Indian War. There was some argument about whether the massacre had ever actually happened, and even among those who believed it had, there was disagreement about whether the Indians had been the massacre-ers or the massacre-ees. Nonetheless, popular legend had it that the pond had turned red with blood from all who died there on that fateful day, whoever they were.

Other legends about the place had sprung up over the years, supported by a couple of centuries of sporadic eyewitness testimony. These eyewitness reports ranged from descriptions of Indian ghosts to unexplained lights swirling over the water on moonless nights. My favorite story (and probably the one that gave me the idea for our film) was that a bizarre swamp creature, a little like a man but a lot like something else, was headquartered there. Every few generations somebody would claim to have been scared out of a decade or two of his allotted lifespan by having had a late-night encounter with this guy, who everybody agreed was anything but friendly.

These stories emanating from around Blood Red Pond added a kind of mystique to the place that I thoroughly enjoyed -- almost as much as I enjoyed its wild beauty. For his part, Mr. Lindstrom didn't give two hoots about the massacre legend, or the supernatural sightings, or, for that matter, the outcry from concerned citizens that by plugging up the outlet he was tampering with a piece of local history, however murky and unsubstantiated. Pop recalls the day he started up his bulldozer, mumbled something about "them sons-o-bitches", and went to work, making the pond pretty much what it is today.

As you might expect from Mr. Lindstrom's apparent lack of fondness for the human race, the property was off limits to everyone from bird watchers to hunters, not to mention the amateur historians. Pop was always welcome though, and Ethan and I were too. Mr. Lindstrom once told Pop that he liked to look at us as his own kids, the only ones he had left, and he hoped Pop didn't mind. Pop told him he was pleased to hear him say it because he wasn't all that confident he could do a good enough job with us on his own. Mr. Lindstrom didn't seem to mind our friends being there either, but I was careful never to bring anybody there who hunted or drank or did anything

else he might not approve of. I think he appreciated this because a couple of summers ago he gave me my own key to the barn where he kept his old wooden rowboat so we could use that whenever we wanted to. A few weekends earlier, we'd wheeled the boat over to the pond and I rowed while Bo sat in front and filmed as we glided past the dead tree trunks that were still sticking up out of the water -- a reminder that most of the swamp used to be woods. The footage we got was outstanding. To see the tape, you'd swear we'd been gliding through some kind of Louisiana bayou that was teeming with alligators and water moccasins and God knows what else. And that was before we'd added sound effects.

Bo finished panning and gave me a little over-the-shoulder wave, which took me by surprise since I hadn't made a sound as far as I could tell. That was more like what I expected from Ethan, who seemed to have a sixth sense about that kind of thing. It was almost impossible to sneak up on Ethan, who was always doing things like answering our door before anybody even rang the bell -- just the opposite of Pop and me, who might not know the difference if somebody was out there taking our front porch apart.

Bo must have noticed my surprised expression. "You're not half as quiet as you think you are, Gabe." He reached down and grabbed his camera bag.

"You may want to stay here for a while," I told him. "Rosasharn and Jeremy are going at in again."

Bo laughed. "Or maybe we'd better get started while they're both still in one piece." He slid the camera bag over my shoulder and picked up his camera and tripod.

"You want to check on your dad first?" Bo asked as we started up the hill. "We can hold off on the shooting."

"Nah," I said. "It's early. I'll do it after."

Bo nodded and we trudged on. A few seconds later we heard some yelling and looked up the hill to see Rosasharn rolling on the ground in front of the campfire. I thought at first he was doing that Curly thing where he gets on the ground and runs his feet around in circles, until I saw Jeremy tear over and start swatting at him. Then Ethan jumped up and got into the act. Bo and I ran up to see what the deal was.

"The stupid tub caught himself on fire," Jeremy told us, still a little out of breath.

Little wisps of smoke rose up from the ankles of Rosasharn's Green Guy costume.

"He was moonwalking," Ethan explained, wide-eyed. "And he went through the fire."

"It was the fire's fault," Rosasharn announced from the ground. "It should have seen me coming."

"Stupid tub," Jeremy said, all indignant. "How's a fire s'posed to see you coming?" That was the beauty of Jeremy: No matter how ridiculous a situation got, he always insisted on being rational. That alone probably went a long way toward explaining his scowl.

I bent down to study Rosasharn's smoldering outfit, a sickly olive-green thing that had been designed and manufactured by Rosasharn's girlfriend Sudie Robinson. The costume consisted of a pair of gray long johns covered with pea-green construction paper scales, along with matching green gloves, and a Halloween headpiece we'd picked up at a costume shop in Schenectady. Some of the scales below the knees were pretty well charred, and we didn't have any paper on hand to fix them up. I reported all this to Bo.

"Hmm...," Bo said, thinking. "Why don't we go out to the road for the car scene? It'll be dark enough by the time we're set up there, and it's almost all long shots and facials so you won't be able to see his ankles much anyway."

He reached down to help Rosasharn to his feet. "You up for this, tiger?"

"Me health has niver been better," Rosasharn said in a lousy Irish accent. "And me mither thanks you fur inquirin'."

"Stupid tub," Jeremy said. And in a strange way his grumpiness was kind of touching. I think he'd been genuinely worried for the big guy.

Jeremy sat there for a minute rotating the steering wheel back and forth and scowling at it. "Is this thing attached to anything?" he wanted to know.

Bo and I laughed. The play in Rosasharn's steering wheel was legendary. We used to joke that you had to turn it three complete revolutions to switch lanes. The rest of the car was no great shakes either. The transmission, an archaic on-the-column three speed, was exactly fifty percent shot, having a second and third gear but no first or reverse. Not only that, but the floor of the car had, over the years, gradually rusted away from the sides, which left it strung there like a hammock, and when you hit bumps it sagged down and gave you a good view of the pavement flying by underneath.

"Okay, start it up," I told Jeremy as Bo went over to help Ethan, who was setting up the video camera. "Pump the gas a few times first."

"Shuddup," Jeremy said. "I know how to drive." He did. Being a farm kid, he'd probably done more driving than all of us put together, but since he was now driving for our film I felt justified in giving him advice.

Jeremy pushed the brake, which you could tell from the way he scrunched down sank almost to the floor. "Ya call this a car?" he said.

The engine turned over slowly as Jeremy hit the key, and with a belch of smoke started up. It sat there wheezing and shaking like something sick that needed to have a blanket thrown over itself.

"Okay," I said, sticking my head in the window. "Remember, no reverse, so you'll just hang a U-ey in my driveway. And be careful on the hill. The road has some major dips there and with this steering, you could lose it. And the most important thing -- are you listening, Jeremy? -- the most important thing is you gotta be able to stop when Rosasharn jumps in front of you. You already know about the brakes, so give yourself room. Ya hear me?" I reached in and rapped on his head a few times.

He slapped my hand away. "Nobody'd stop for that," he said, pointing at Rosasharn, who was coming toward us in his Green Guy get-up.

"Just follow the script, Jeremy. When he jumps in front of you, stop. Humor me on this one."

"Greetings from the swamp world," Rosasharn said.

"Nobody'd stop for that," Jeremy said again and shoved the car in gear. Then, tromping down on the gas, he feathered the clutch and tried to coax the car forward. From the sound, you'd've thought it was the space shuttle lifting off. A few seconds later the car started moving. You might have had the feeling you were watching the whole scene in slow motion except the car was shaking like crazy and Jeremy seemed to be scowling at his usual speed.

I stepped back out of the smoke cloud and watched the car limp up the hill. When it made the top, I started in on Rosasharn. "Remember," I told him, "Stay outta camera range until the car gets close and then come charging into its field of vision. You can stay behind that bush over by the barn until it's time."

"Zay will not drive zee car past my swamp," Rosasharn told me. "Zay must be stopped."

"Yeah, well make sure zay don't run over you," I cautioned him.

Rosasharn shuffled off toward his bush and I headed over to where Bo and Ethan were. The way we had it planned was that on Jeremy's first run Bo would shoot a long shot of the attack from the entrance lane. Ethan had already turned on the yard light that was attached to the peak of the old barn. Bo figured the yard light, along with the headlights on Rosasharn's car, should give the scene a kind of glary, shadowy effect, where you'd see Green Guy, but not too clearly, which was important considering how ratty he looked, especially in the ankle department. Then we'd have Jeremy do a couple more runs for shots from different angles, and finally Bo'd get some footage from inside the car looking out the windshield.

I ran over and stood behind Ethan, trying to picture how it all might come out. I'd written it, but I wasn't too sure how it would translate onto film. As usual I had to trust Bo to make it look right.

Bo knew what I was thinking and laughed. "We'll get what we get," he said. That pretty much summed up Bo's whole approach to life, and it was one of the things I really admired about him. Most people our age fell into two categories: They either didn't care about things at all, or if they did, they were completely neurotic about them. Bo really poured himself into pretty much everything he did; he just didn't worry very much about how things panned out. Even so, I'd bet dollars to doughnuts that no filmmaker his age in the country was doing better work than Bo Michaelson.

Right after I finished thinking this, I noticed a set of headlights shooting up over the hill Jeremy had just disappeared behind.

"That can't be him already," I said. "Can it?"

We stood there watching as a car cleared the hill.

"It's not him," Bo said. "Listen."

He was right. What we were hearing was a regular car, the kind of car Rosasharn's would never sound like again.

It was bearing down on us.

"Let's get outta sight," I said, "so whoever's in that car doesn't stop and ruin the shot when Jeremy shows up."

Ethan was already picking up the camera bag, and Bo grabbed the camera and tripod. We all hurried toward the barn.

"Sit tight, Rosasharn," I said as ducked into the barn.

"Zay will not drive zee car past my swamp!" we heard Rosasharn say.

"It's not Jeremy, Rosasharn!" I hissed out the door. "Stay put!"

"Zay must be stopped!"

I looked at Bo. He looked back at me and shrugged. Ethan crept up to the only window on the road side of the barn and peeked out. Bo was next. Soon all three of our faces were pressed up against the glass.

At first we couldn't see the actual car, only the light it cast on the trees and bushes alongside the road. We could see Rosasharn though, crouched behind his bush right off to the side from our window, and two seconds later we heard what might have been a cross between a Tarzan yell and a moose in heat, and our man Rosasharn was on the move. He charged onto the road, planted his feet, and held up his hands like some kind of underworld traffic cop. The car, which I recognized right away as Ray McPherson's -- an old wreck of a Buick stitched together with Bondo and a colorful mixture of preowned fenders -- screeched to a halt in front of him. Before the front end had quit bobbing, Rosasharn was on the hood and heading for the windshield. He was making some kind of barking noise and clapping his hands together.

"He's doing that seal thing he does," I heard from Bo, whose head was just the other side of Ethan's. For someone who takes things pretty much in stride, he sounded fairly amazed.

It was a sight to behold. Rosasharn was sitting up on the hood as if he were waiting for a fish to be dropped in his mouth. At that point Ray must've all of a sudden snapped out of it because he hit reverse and gunned it, sending Rosasharn out of his seal pose and into a backward roll. He landed on the pavement, and the car screeched out of our range of vision and made what sounded like a power U-turn. A few seconds later it was history.

We ran out to check on Rosasharn. He was up on all fours when we got to him.

"Woof," he said, being a dog now and looking to where the car had disappeared over the hill.

You all right, killer?" Bo asked, patting his head.

"Woof," he said, and gave us a nod.

We helped him to his feet and brushed him off a little.

"I can't believe you, Rosasharn," I said, laughing. "You're crazy."

"Yes," he said, tilting his head and pointing his finger philosophically, "but still I must protect zee swamp."

We were still laughing about that when I noticed Ethan looking out into the trees across the road with that look he gets every once in a while. Whatever was there, I couldn't see. But that was when it all began. At least for me it was.

This is the end of Chapter One, *Flyers*.

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