

Chapter Three

Jacob stepped into Golden Memories and saw Ian sitting there, engrossed in the latest issue of Swamp Thing. He went past him wordlessly, toward the rack of comics across from the counter. There were new issues of the Amazing Spider Man, Aquaman, and Superman sitting there waiting to be read. Detective Comics was there too. The front cover had Batman swinging across the Gotham City skyline, hurling a batarang at some unseen foe with his free hand.

But what caught his interest was the new issue of Savage Hawkman. He needed this one for research, if Osprey Man was to rise again and fight this summer. Jon had been very concerned about not wanting to mimic Hawkman too closely. Jacob didn't think Osprey Man was anything like Hawkman. He was more like Batman—a winged crusader for animal justice--than Hawkman, who came from a family of weird looking hawk creatures, as far as Jacob knew. He'd never read an issue of Hawkman, so he decided to take the plunge today.

The opening pages were a little different than Jacob expected. Hawkman appeared to be in the midst of a convocation of Hawks. They sat around a long table, and the guy at its head, who wore green, red, and purple plumage in addition to the golden feathers preferred by the rest of the hawkpeople, held a jeweled scepter. They were on another planet, called Thanagar.

He didn't like the comic much. He didn't think Osprey Man looked anything like Hawkman, and more importantly, Osprey Man was human, from Earth. He put the comic back on the rack and kept looking.

“Not surprised you don't want that one,” Ian said, without looking up from his comic. “Not many people like Hawkman these days. Even Green Arrow is more popular.”

Jacob nodded. He picked out his favorites, like always: Detective Comics, Batman, Action Comics. On a whim he decided to get Spider Man too. Jon liked it, so he wanted to do it in tribute to his friend.

Ian put down his copy of Swamp Thing when Jacob came to the register. He rang the comics up, banging his fingers on his small calculator. It had a roll of tape on the end of it that he always tore off for a receipt, not that Jacob ever wanted one. “Two dollars and twenty-five cents,” he said.

Jacob dug into his knapsack and produced three rumpled bills. Maybe it was a little extravagant—spending almost half of the five bucks he’d been saving in one trip—but he felt like buying comics today. He rationalized the purchase by thinking of the free pizza and coke he’d already eaten. That alone would have used up at least two bucks.

“What did you do, roll them around in the dirt before you got here?” Ian said. He looked at the three crumpled bills on the counter.

“Sorry,” Jacob said. He took them one by one and flattened them out against the counter with the palm of his hand.

Ian shook his head and put them in the drawer beneath the counter, and gave him three quarters in change.

“Is Swamp Thing any good?” Jacob asked.

Ian shrugged. “You like horror stuff? Like Creepshow?”

“I saw that movie with the guy who played Han Solo,” Jacob said.

“Harrison Ford?” Ian said, with an amused smile. “You mean Blade Runner. That’s hardly a horror movie, but good for you, kid. That movie was hot shit.”

Jacob felt emboldened. This was probably the longest conversation he’d ever had with Ian, and he didn’t want it to end. “I also saw Jaws,” he said. He looked up at the huge poster of The Creepshow Creep behind Ian. He was a skeleton with a gaping, grinning mouth, beckoning with a crooked finger. “I never saw Creepshow though,” he added.

“Well, Jaws is a good start, Ian said. You could do a lot worse than Jaws and Blade Runner. Creepshow is good too, you could maybe rent it sometime.”

“I don’t have a VCR,” Jacob said.

“Bummer,” Ian said. “Well, we have a movie group you might like. We meet every week or so right here. I set up a place in back. There are a few kids that come, but it’s mostly adults. A couple of older kids come.” He handed Jacob a yellow flier with black print on it. The top of it read: “THE RIVERHEAD HORROR CLUB PRESENTS” and beneath it were listed dates and movies:

The Blob—June 23

Day of the Triffids—June 30

The Thing—July 6

Friday the 13th—July 13

The Day the Earth Stood Still—July 20

War of the Worlds—July 27

The Shining—August 3

Jacob read the titles eagerly. “I’d love to come see these, if my mom will let me,” he said, and immediately regretted it. Ian was likely to laugh at him for checking with his mom.

To Jacob’s surprise, Ian said, “Sure, kid. Check with her and come on down if you want.” He smiled, not unkindly, and Jacob wondered why he had always been so quiet around the guy. He seemed OK, once you got him talking about stuff he liked.

“But what about Swamp Thing?” Jacob pressed.

“Well, if you like the movies you mentioned and you want to see more like them, I guess you’d like Swamp Thing well enough.”

Jacob turned back to the rack and pulled Swamp Thing down from it. The mis-shapen creature was there on the cover, black and monstrous as he rose from murky depths, as big as Superman but evil looking, made of pulpy plant matter, twigs and moss. He stared out with angry red eyes. In his arms he held a white-haired woman who lay there unconscious.

“I’ll take it, then,” Jacob said. Suddenly he was more interested in Swamp Thing’s exploits than Batman’s.

“Excellent,” Ian said. “I always like turning kids on to cool stuff. That’s seventy-five cents.” Jacob pulled another crumpled dollar from his pocket, and began to smooth it against the edge of the counter.

Ian laughed. “Ah, I was just giving you a hard time, man,” he said. “If it’s green, I’ll take it.” He gave Jacob back a quarter.

Jacob turned to go, then paused. “Do you remember the kid I come in here with sometimes?” he said. “He’s shorter than me, with glasses?”

“Oh,” Ian said. “Yeah. Kind of small, with a lisp. Nice kid. I remember him.”

“Was he here last night?” Jacob said.

“I saw him on my way out,” Ian said. “He pulled his bike up but I had to leave early. My mom’s in the hospital and I had to visit her. Why?”

“Well, you might have heard,” Jacob said, and felt his voice tremble. “He didn’t make it back home, so you won’t see him in here again.” He faltered and tried not to cry again, not in front of the comic book man.

“Jesus, I’m sorry, kid. Really sorry. I heard about that.” He was quiet for a minute as Jacob stood there, not knowing what to say. “You stay tough, dude, you hear me?” Ian said.

Jacob nodded and turned to go.

“Hey kid!” Ian said. He reached below the counter and brought up a bundle of comics, tied together with packing twine. “I was going to throw these ones out anyway. They got water stained and the company won’t take ‘em back. Damn Fed Ex guy left the package in the rain. But they’re yours if you want ‘em. I think there’s a few issues of Batman and Hawkman in there. Might even be another Swamp Thing issue. Though it might be a little heavy for you to carry all the way home. You want ‘em?”

Jacob eyed the cornucopia of comics greedily. “Do I?” he said happily. “Jeez, are you sure, Ian?”

“Sure as Swamp Thing’s a flawed, Byronic hero,” Ian said with a grin.

“What’s that mean?” Jacob said.

“Ah, never mind,” Ian said. He put the books in a large grocery bag and pushed the package across the counter to Jacob. “Enjoy them. God knows somebody should get something out of the deal.” He looked at Jacob with narrowed eyes, suddenly serious. “Only don’t tell your friends! They’ll start thinking I give stuff away for free. Next thing you know they’ll be spilling Big Gulps on issues they want and trying to take ‘em home.”

Jacob grabbed the package. It was heavier than he thought it might be, but he could manage. From the weight of it he figured there must be twenty or thirty issues in there. “Thanks, Ian,” he said. “By the way, my name’s Jake,” he called over his shoulder as he walked out of the store.

“OK Jake,” Ian said. “See you soon, man.”

The bell above him jangled as he went into the street. What was he going to do with all these comics? He might have to make a detour home before visiting Jon’s parents. He couldn’t very well show up there with dozens of new comics, could he? It would make him look—what was the word he wanted? Callous. (It had just been on a vocabulary test.) He didn’t want to seem callous, like he thought comics were more important than their son. So he’d go home and drop them off, then go to the Hubbards’.

Jeez, he thought, feeling the heft of the bag in his hands. For this many comics, Jon would understand why I have to do a pit stop home. He would want me to go and read some of them before paying my respects.

He walked up the block, toting his treasures past the Riverhead Savings Bank and the Peconic Paddler, where he saw a group of cub scouts, resplendent in their blue and gold uniforms, about to brave the mighty and wild river on rented canoes with their dads. It would be an awesome ride—he knew because he’d done it before-- heading out from Main Street, behind the McDonald’s, under Riverside Bridge and finally out past all of mankind’s works and into the great wilderness of Eastern Long Island, the Pine Barrens. He envied them a little, and mentally placed a canoe trip on his to-do list for summer 1984. He could paddle up and down the river in honor of Jonathan. Maybe raise some money for the scholarship fund. The idea pleased him, and he thought Jon would be happy he was going to do it. He turned down Third Street, toward home.