

JAKE'S DRAGON

Chapter 1

Jake was excited about the first day of summer break from school. What healthy eleven-year-old boy wouldn't be? Having packed all his fishing gear onto his bicycle the night before, he awoke and dressed at the crack of dawn, wrapped some leftover chicken and biscuits in a paper towel, and stuffed them into his backpack before darting out the back door and down the lane on his bike.

The lake was only about two miles behind his house, but the thick summertime foliage of the cedar, oak, and maple trees populating the forest separating them made Jake's preferred fishing cove nearly invisible until you were right on top of it.

That being said, the cove itself was a breathtaking sight to behold. The mist hovering above the surface of the lake would burn off instantly once the sun cleared the treetops, revealing a mirrorlike surface virtually free of waves and ripples.

Along the shores, the diversity of the surrounding forest gave way to a thick concentration of cedars, which, because of their density, had choked out most other species of trees and vegetation along the water's edge. As a result, the ground beneath the cedar canopy was rocky and often precarious to navigate.

Parking his bike in a small grassy area alongside a stream that flowed into the lake, Jake grabbed his fishing gear and made his way across the rocky terrain to his favorite fishing spot: an old rock wall that

extended out into the lake about thirty feet from the shore.

For Jake, the first cast of the day was always the most exciting. His favorite lure, a black-and-white speckled rooster tail, was permanently attached to the line, so his fishing rod was always ready for action.

The first cast was a long one as the line spun off the spool with a familiar whirring sound, breaking the silence that preceded the quiet splash of the lure into the placid water. As he reeled in, water droplets adorning the fishing line glistened in the morning sun appearing above the tree line surrounding the peaceful cove. Jake repeated this process on autopilot over and over without any serious mental participation while taking in the tranquil beauty of this idyllic little cove.

Suddenly, he felt that familiar double tap on the rooster tail and reflexively raised his rod tip to set the hook. The immediate tensioning of the line vaporized the dangling water droplets as a largemouth bass broke the water thirty yards from him. The fight was on.

Keeping the rod tip high, as his father had taught him, he adjusted the drag wheel to keep the line tight while preventing the fish from snapping it. After several minutes of following the bass up and down the rocky shore, he was finally close enough to net the fish and carry it out of and away from the water.

Holding the slippery fish down atop one of the large stones scattered across the ground, Jake used a pair of needle-nose pliers to carefully remove the treble hook from its mouth. Picking it up with both hands, he lifted the exhausted largemouth bass up into the air, admiring the intricate details and unique patterns of the scales along its back and sides.

After scrutinizing the fish for several minutes and from several different angles in the light of the morning sun, Jake walked back down to the water, releasing it into the lake at the exact spot where he'd landed it. It took a moment for the fish to realize it'd been freed, and upon that realization, it jetted back out into the cool deep waters of Old Hickory Lake.

Jake gathered his fishing gear and backpack and then returned to the grassy area beside the stream where he'd parked his bicycle. The remainder of his morning, he spent with his sketchbook and colored art pencils in hand, recreating in painstaking detail the image of the fish he'd caught and released earlier.

His tendency to block out every distraction and single-mindedly concentrate on a specific task at hand was something that made other children of his age very uncomfortable around him. The fact that he had never shared the products of these trancelike detours from society left them clueless as to the depth of his cognitive and artistic abilities.

Jake sketched astoundingly accurate, lifelike images of every fish he had ever caught. Within mere minutes, he could visually analyze any object, person, or animal and then produce artistic renderings of them that were so clear, they could easily be mistaken for photographs.

His "fishing" sketchbook was filled with remarkably vivid drawings of bass, bluegill, crappie, catfish, carp, stripers, and even a turtle he'd once snagged by mistake. His ever-present backpack was stuffed tightly with art supplies and other sketchbooks designated for various subjects such as clouds, birds, landscapes, wild animals, trees, flowers, cars, people, buildings, insects, and arachnids, and even ghosts.

After finishing the drawing of the day's catch, he put away his sketchbook and pencils and then pulled out the chicken and biscuits he'd grabbed for lunch on his way out the door.

Gazing out across the lake, Jake watched the sunlight reflecting from the ripples in the water, whipped up by a light summer breeze. He smiled at the sight as the caps of each little wave glistened like diamonds.

Beyond the water, on the opposite side of the cove, he saw it, sprawled out along the rocky floor of the forest a few yards back from the shore. It was well camouflaged and nearly invisible as it blended in with the large black and gray stones surrounding it. The blotches of shade created by the canopy of cedar trees added the crowning touch, creating a near-perfect disguise for what appeared to be a truly massive creature.

Near perfect . . .

Jake leaned back on his elbows with his legs crossed at the ankles, watching the creature for several minutes while eating the lunch he'd brought with him, his eyes mostly hidden behind his baseball cap.

Mostly hidden . . .

The creature, with its fiery eyes barely even open, seemed to be assessing whether or not the young boy across the cove had actually noticed him. Like a chameleon, it could easily blend in with any natural surface. The only part of its body it couldn't change were the golden eyes it attempted to minimize by keeping them nearly shut.

Jake wasn't fooled. He knew exactly what he was looking at, but nothing in his demeanor betrayed that knowledge to the creature watching him from across the cove.

Jake finished his lunch and collected the paper towels, water bottle, and chicken bones he'd brought with him, leaving nothing behind, as his father had emphasized to him on many occasions. Mounting his bike and slinging his backpack onto his shoulders, Jake nonchalantly peddled his bike back up the road to his house as if nothing out of the ordinary had even happened.

Silently greeting his mom and dad as he came in through the back-screen door, Jake rushed up the stairs to his bedroom, smiling. Today he'd start his new sketchbook: "Dragons."

Chapter 2

For most people, such a close encounter with a dragon would have been terrifying, but for Jake, it was just another natural wonder hiding in plain sight. He'd seen many things in his rather brief lifetime that others had simply overlooked or downright failed to recognize. When trying to point them out, he'd either been laughed at and ridiculed or, even worse, ignored completely.

For Jake, explaining these things to others was like trying to describe the color purple to someone who'd been color-blind since birth. After a while, he'd learned to keep quiet about his more extraordinary encounters, and with no one to talk to about them, he grew more and more silent; sometimes he didn't speak at all.

Of all the things Jake had encountered, this was the most amazing by far. The moment he reached his room, he shed his backpack, placing it on the bookshelf beside his drawing table, and picked out one of the neatly stacked cellophane-wrapped sketchbooks from the bottom drawer of his nightstand.

He opened the wrapper carefully so as not to tear it. After each sketch, he would slip the sketchbooks back into the cellophane as an extra measure to protect them from moisture and other elements that could accidentally damage them. He laid the freshly opened book in the center of the drawing table, running his hands across the thick textured paper. His first order of business was creating the title page, which needed to be just as elaborate as every drawing that would eventually be added to the book.

From memory, he first selected the pencil colors that most closely matched the colored scales of the dragon and the moss-covered rocks upon which it was lying. There was no hurry. He'd watched the dragon for several minutes

while eating his lunch, and the image was seared indelibly into his memory.

It took him several hours to complete the title page, and once finished . . . it was magnificent, incorporating the dragon's colors as well as elements of its most prominent physical characteristics. Satisfied it was an accurate representation, Jake turned the page and immediately went to work on bringing his first dragon to life inside the pages of the sketchbook.

Jake never made assumptions in his drawings or inferred details that he hadn't actually seen. The drawings were as factual as mathematics, with no allowance for deviation or speculation, yet his clinical accuracy did not detract from the artistic beauty of the images. It enhanced them.

For most people, the image of a dragon is akin to that of a flying dinosaur. This was no dinosaur. It was sleek and sinewy. Even at rest, it exuded a sense of brute strength tempered by grace and elegance. Its markings adapted and changed as quickly as did the shadows created by the sun breaking through the canopy of cedar trees, gently swayed by the afternoon breeze.

By now, Jake was completely immersed in the mental recollection of his dragon. He worked fast not because it was necessary but because he himself was anxious to see the completed depiction of the amazing beast he'd discovered that morning.

With him having been able to observe the dragon inconspicuously for several minutes, most of the details flowed quickly from his mind, through his fingertips, and onto the page by way of his adeptly wielded colored pencils.

The dragon's eyes were an altogether different matter. He'd caught only a fleeting glimpse of them before the dragon had narrowed them into mere slits to avoid detection. For those details, Jake would need to make another visit to the cove, and this time, he would need to get closer.

