

Chapter One

One of my best dreams ever. A flying dream. Me, Jake Wasniewski, with wings like a megabat, a flying fox. Powerful wings. Only these aren't brown. They're blue. And sparkly. A single stroke shoots me into an updraft, my stomach racing to keep up. Farms and rivers slide by. Up ahead, a city of glass, shining like a treasure in the sun. Then...voices. My bat ears twitch. *Huh?*

They're at it again. Smack in the middle of a flying dream. I check the clock on the nightstand, the green numbers ghosting 11:35. The back-and-forth words coming from the kitchen are getting louder, sharper.

Wish our house had an upstairs like Luke's.

Wish I had a remote control that could mute anything.

"Jake," Cassie murmurs.

"It's okay," I say, reaching to flick on the lamp.

Cassie squints even though the yellow light is dim. She listens to the harsh-sounding words, then rolls out of bed, Thumper tucked safely under one arm.

Scampering around to the bed's other side, she squeezes between mattress and wall, and pushes, grunts. The bed moans, then gives in to be scraped across the floor. Cassie pushes--grunts--until the mattress bumps the nightstand. She knows that's as far as she can go.

"You can't be moving your bed right up to mine," I've had to tell her more than once. "See that nightstand there?...that's the limit. That's the boundary. That whole strip there is

poison. It's bad enough we have to share the same room, bad enough you get scared like that. A guy needs his privacy."

She smiles over at me, that goofy seven-year-old grin of hers, then bounds up onto the mattress, slithers under the sheet, moves Thumper up top for air, and sighs. "You can turn the light off now."

"Oh, can I?" I say, a little mad at the ordering sound of her voice, as if a soon-to-be second grader could ever tell a soon-to-be fifth grader what to do.

I reach over and flick off the lamp. Mom and Dad are flinging spears at each other. *I'm selfish? Looks who's talking. Me? Don't make me laugh! You don't have a clue, do you?...*

"Okay, Jake," Cassie says through the new dark.

That means it's time for another story. Sometimes I wish I hadn't started this whole story thing. As if telling stories to your little sister could ever cover up the voices, the arguing.

"You'd better be listening," I say, "because I'm starting right now and the last time you didn't hear the beginning because you were listening to something else. You hear?"

"Un-uh."

Suddenly the back-and-forth spears stop. Hard footsteps. The front door slamming-- so hard the whole house jumps, including my ears. Lights swing past the window as the car backs onto the street. I wait till I can't hear the engine anymore. Then the kitchen screen door opens and slams, and I know Mom is outside fumbling for a cigarette.

"Jake?"

"Dang it, Cassie. Hold your horses."

I cross my hands behind my head, slide my feet beneath the sheet to find some fresh cool. At least I won't have to talk loud. "Once," I begin. "Once there was a baby dragon named Smoke. A girl dragon. And she had a brother dragon named Bonfire. And the two liked to stomp over the world and play all the latest dragon games...like..."

"Like what?" Cassie says, unable to stop herself. There's real interest in her voice, and I can tell she's glad too that the shouting has stopped.

"I'm thinking," I say.

"Don't rush Jake, Thumper," she says as if I might actually fall for a talking stuffed rabbit. "It's his story and he'll tell it the way he wants...Right, Jake?"

I draw circles with my toes under the sheet and go on, telling whatever comes to mind, about Smoke and Bonfire, about their life in a tiny cave on the side of a mountain, how the two are learning to fly, how Bonfire did his first loop-de-loop today, how Smoke got so excited she torched one of the trees outside the cave.

I tell until Cassie's even breathing lets me know she's asleep. I listen hard for wheezing, but her air sounds clear. Then Mom taps at the door and steps in, a strip of living-room light cutting across my bed.

"You kids okay?"

I don't say anything.

She moves to our beds, checks Cassie, sees the bed has been moved again.

"She okay?" she asks, cigarette smell moving over me.

"Yeah," I answer.

I turn over just as she leans down to kiss me, turn quickly so I won't have to see if she's been crying.

"Good night, then," she whispers.

"Night," I say into my pillow, thinking of where I want the new dragon story to go...how next time maybe Smoke and Bonfire will leave their tiny cave for a bigger and better one...one with room after room after room, high up on the tallest mountain where the air is so clean you can breathe it all the way down to your toes and not wheeze or hack or cough.

The clock shows 12:00. Midnight. I close my eyes and reach for my wings.