

# JAKE and the TIGER FLIGHT

Jake closed the back door of the hardware store before he took out the handheld video game. It felt wrong to be playing instead of working. Dad never took a break and he'd been going nonstop since they got there, helping customers, unpacking boxes, answering the phone, and paying bills. All the while he smiled, happy to be where he was and doing whatever needed doing, in love with his work, his "dream."

Hopefully when his own dream came knocking, Jake thought, it would make him feel like that. Sitting on the back stoop, he switched on the handheld and selected "Perils of Perinox" from the menu. His guilt evaporated as he lost himself in the awesome graphics and sound effects. His reflexes were sharp, his aim better than ever as his Space Marine crossed the misty swamp, shooting slimy monsters to pieces. Maybe by the time he grew up there would be a starship academy and he could go around the universe hunting down evil creatures. Talk about a dream. Bzzzp, bzzzp—take that, squiddy!

His Space Marine advanced quickly to the dungeon corridor where Mom had interrupted the battle and gotten him killed. This time he knew to watch the floor grates for tentacles.

A new sound wormed its way into his thoughts, the rumbling drone of an engine. The deep, powerful thrum didn't sound like a car or truck. Maybe an airplane? He knew there was an airport across the highway, but the noise was so near—the only planes he'd seen were way up high. As it grew louder, he realized that he heard more than one engine, more like three or four. He could barely concentrate on the game.

The throaty rumble now filled his ears. It vibrated in his chest and rattled his bones. The sound became a part of him. Instead of being scared, he liked the feeling.

No, he loved it.

Surrendering to these new sensations, Jake looked up from the game. Time ebbed and everything moved in slow motion. Slow enough that he could see and memorize every detail.

Four airplanes rushed toward him, not much higher than the roof of the store. He'd never seen planes like these. Their bellies were creamy white, and the rest of each aircraft was painted bright orange, with wavy black tiger stripes. Instead of having just one tail, each plane had two fins that jutted out from the sides, forming a wide letter H. Twin-tailed tigers!

They flew in a tight diamond formation, their wingtips only a few feet apart, with one in the lead, one on each side, and one trailing. The airplanes were so close to him he could even see the pilots, who all wore black baseball caps and sunglasses. As Jake stared up, the lead pilot looked down at him and saluted. It was like a movie hero reaching out

of the screen to pull Jake into a fantasy world and make him magical too. He saw me, Jake thought. *He saw me!*

A chill raced over his arms and down his back. It went even deeper than where the engines vibrated his bones, to a place in his soul where it slid in as smooth as a key, then turned like a stunt plane doing a rollover, unlocking something inside.

He'd never thought of flying planes as something he wanted to do. Now, however, he could imagine piloting in the lead tiger aircraft, looking down on a kid while he kept his formation tight. He really could envision himself up there in the cockpit and it felt *right*. Was this the feeling Dad had been talking about?

The whole show seemed to be just for him. It was a dream served up on a tiger-striped platter. He hadn't missed out after all!

His body, a tightly bound spring, suddenly uncoiled. He jumped up and down and waved his arms at the pilots. The video game was long forgotten. "Hey!" he shouted. "Hey!"

He felt as light as the air under those amazing wings. "Heyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!"

Then time sped up again. The formation zoomed past him and over the roof of the hardware store. They slid smoothly from a diamond shape into a tight diagonal line, an orange and black arrow slicing through the sky.

Jake raced around the corner of the building to keep them in sight. Each aircraft turned sharply above the highway, following the plane in front of it—one, two, three, four. He wanted to chase them across the road and follow them forever, but they disappeared from view beyond the trees. The twin-tailed tigers were descending rapidly, no doubt heading for the airport.

Fighting for breath in the parking lot, Jake still enjoyed the rumble of the engines in his chest, as deep as a tiger's growl. The colors around him—the sky and grass and cars going by—were more intense than he'd ever seen.

This is it, he said to himself. This is what a dream feels like.

Closing his eyes, he replayed the flight of the four tigers again and again. He saw the pilot's salute, the man looking right at him. Such a gift should've been enough, but he knew he wouldn't be happy until he saw those planes up close. Until he sat in the cockpit. Until he flew.