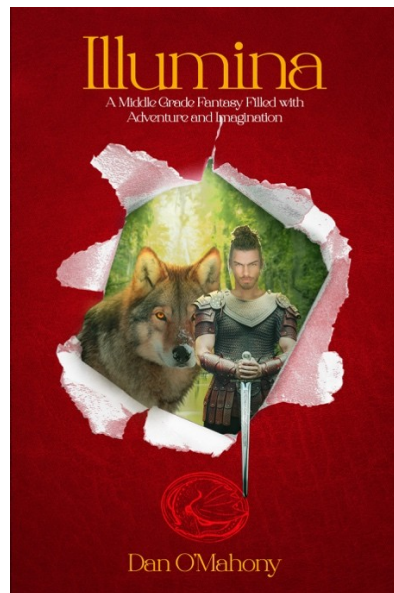


FREE PREVIEW***Chapter One***

The universe explodes in a huge ball of fire. The skies burn uncontrollably. It takes centuries for everything to finally cool down, leaving nothing but pitch-black space in all directions. I'm there, floating in that space, all alone – until the dragon appears.

It's massive, like a planet. Its golden scales glimmer. The heat of its body warms me like the sun. Each beat of its wings creates gusts of wind that send me gliding further through space.

“Ronnie?”

I blink back to reality. Instead of floating through space, I'm sitting in the passenger seat of Grandpa's truck, outside of Hamilton Middle School. Great, I don't even remember getting here, and who knows how long I've been sitting here staring ahead like a zombie.

Grandpa chuckles. "What's the matter? You still asleep?"

He slugs my shoulder. Grandpa's a retired Marine, so he's still pretty buff. Ow. Seriously Ow. I know it's meant to be a playful gesture, but man, it doesn't exactly tickle.

"Yeah. Still a little sleepy," I say.

He and Grandma worry about me enough already, about how I'm dealing with Mom and Dad's death. They don't need to know about the dragon too. How I've been seeing it all the time.

"You're not having nightmares again, are you?" Grandpa asks.

I shift in my seat and tug on the cuffs of my long-sleeve shirt. No. No nightmares about Mom or Dad. Or the Face in the Fire.

"I'm just nervous," I tell him. "About going back to school. A new school."

"If you're not ready yet, it's okay. The school will understand."

I manage a smile. For such a tough-guy, Grandpa can be really understanding sometimes.

"It's been long enough," I tell him. "I'm ready."

At least I think I am.

"That's my soldier." Grandpa slugs me again – on the same exact spot as the first time.

I step out of the truck. Grandpa throws me a salute, and I give him one back as he drives away. My first stop is the office. The school secretary must know about me, about what happened to Mom and Dad, because when I tell her my name, she gives me a sad smile and looks like she wants to reach over and hug me. I really hope she doesn't. She gives me my schedule, locker assignment, and a map of the school.

I'm supposed to see the counselor, Mrs. Jenkins, first. She's really nice and says all of my teachers know about what's going on with me, and if I feel panicky at all I just have to tell them, and they'll give me a pass to her office. I thank her and ask if there's anything else she needs from me before I go.

The first bell rings, startling me a little. I push through the big, double doors and step into the quad. There are kids everywhere, all headed in different directions on the way to their first class.

I grip the straps on my backpack and rush in, slipping through any openings that appear in the crowd. I get shoved and knocked around. All the kids passing by me grin and make little comments, no doubt because I'm so small for my age. Seriously, I look more like a fourth grader than a sixth grader – which I am.

All of a sudden, it feels like they're seeing right through me and know what happened to me. My heart beats faster. I'm not sure I can do this anymore. Maybe I am not ready yet. No, I've got to try. I breathe just like Dr. Hollis taught me and slowly start relaxing. I remind myself there's no way they can know about what happened, not by looking at me.

I make it to my first class, Math, right before the late bell rings. All eyes turn toward me, the new kid, as I enter the room. I get more looks, chuckles, and grins. A man dressed in a shirt and tie approaches me. He must be the teacher, Mr. Preston.

“Can I help you, son?”

I hand him my schedule. My voice comes out all soft and tiny. “I'm Ronnie Jackman. I'm in your class.”

Mr. Preston stares at my schedule then hands it back to me with a sad smile, just like the school secretary did. He helps me find a desk in the back of the room then brings me a textbook and tells me which page to turn to.

I have a hard time concentrating during the lesson, just like Dr. Hollis said I might. Somehow, I manage. My next two classes are Science and Social Studies. When I meet the teachers, they each give me sad smiles just like Mr. Preston and the school secretary did. It's starting to bother me a little.

All day long, I work hard on my assignments and try to make a good impression on my teachers. I monitor my breath, so I can stay in the moment, just like Dr. Hollis taught me. But I keep daydreaming about the dragon. I can't help it. Every time, whatever classroom I'm in ends up fading away, and I'm back, floating in space, with the dragon. Only now, there are two smaller dragons with it. One of them shines with white light so bright I can barely make out its shape, while the other one glows with a softer, silver light.

Funny thing is, seeing them is starting to make me relax, even smile a little. They make me want to ignore my work completely and fly with them, see where they'll take me. And I want to go too but know I can't. I have to stay grounded.

I have one more class before lunch. Language Arts. According to my schedule, the teacher's name is Mrs. Price, but I don't see a woman at the front of the class. Instead, there's a tall skinny man with copper-colored hair and big, black glasses. He stands over a table sifting through some papers.

When I approach him, he lifts his head and greets me with a big, happy smile.

"Uh, Mrs. Price?" I ask.

The man's eyebrows arch, almost cartoon like.

"No. Sorry," he says in a cool British accent, like a character from Doctor Who. "I'm afraid I go by my maiden name these days."

I grin, embarrassed. "I mean, is this Mrs. Price's class?"

"Yes, it is. Only I'm afraid Mrs. Price is going to be out for quite a while. I'll be teaching in her place. Mr. Griffin." He holds out his hand. "And you are?"

“Ronnie Jackman. It’s my first day.”

“Mine too. Fancy that. Well, it’s lovely meeting you, Ronnie. I look forward to working with you. Now, why don’t you go find a place to sit. Class is about to start.”

I find a desk in the back and unpack my things as Mr. Griffin gets the class’s attention. Once everyone’s quiet, he introduces himself and tells them Mrs. Price will be out for a few weeks, and he’ll be in charge.

Most of the kids look pretty happy about that. Some even pump their fists and mouth *yes*. The only person who looks disappointed about Mrs. Price’s absence is this girl with long black hair. She’s pretty, like a model, and dressed like she could be one too.

“I thought we’d start the day with a little writing activity,” says Mr. Griffin.

Everyone groans, including me. I hate writing.

The girl flashes a bright smile and raises her hand.

“Yes?” says Mr. Griffin. “Oh, and your name, please.”

“Bianca Hawthorne, hi,” she says. “Will we be writing a persuasive or informative essay?”

“Neither,” says Mr. Griffin. “It’ll be a piece of fiction. A short story.”

I look up, surprised. I can’t remember the last time I wrote a story in school. I’m not alone either. A lot of the other kids in class look just as surprised as me.

“Did Mrs. Price put that in her lesson plans?” Bianca asks. “We’ve only been writing informative and persuasive essays in her class. That’s what we’re going to be tested on in spring. You should really be following the lesson plans.”

“And we’ll get to them. But first, a spot of creative writing to liven things up a bit,” says Mr. Griffin, rubbing his hands together.

Bianca has a worried frown on her face. “What will we be writing about?”

“Whatever you wish. In any manner you wish.”

My eyes go wide. Is he serious? He's not going to tell us what we're supposed to do? We're supposed to just come up with our own thing, our own way? I'm not used to that. So are the other kids by the looks of it.

"But we need a prompt," says Bianca. "We need – something."

"No. You really don't," says Mr. Griffin. "Give it a go. You might surprise yourself. Now, everyone get a Chromebook. You'll type your story in one of those and submit it to me on your class' Google Classroom when time's up."

Everyone gets up slowly to fetch Chromebooks from the cart in the back of the room. I get mine, open up Google Docs, and end up staring at the blank screen for what seems like forever.

Mr. Griffin strolls around the room. "Come along now, children. Spit-spot. I'm not hearing fingers hitting keys. Let's go. Clickety-clack. Clickety-clack," he adds, typing on an invisible keyboard. He stops at my desk. "Ronnie?"

I hesitate then say, "I'm – thinking."

Mr. Griffin crouches beside me. "There's your problem. Don't think about it. Write about it. Whatever's in your head, let it out on the page. Shape it and breathe life into it with words. I don't care how silly or stupid your ideas might seem to you. Take a chance. Put them out there. You just might surprise yourself."

I make a nervous face. Mr. Griffin might not care if I come up with something silly or stupid. But I sure do.

Mr. Griffin leans in close. "Ronnie, you've got something worth sharing inside you. You may not believe it, but I do. I can almost see it. Right there."

He taps my forehead with his finger. When he does, the dragon appears. It flies right at me. No, not *it*. The dragon's a *she*. And she has a story to tell me.

Birth of the Dragon World

By

Ronnie Jackman

The universe exploded. A fiery cloud consumed the planets and snuffed out the stars. When the last of the flames finally died, they appeared. Illumina, a great golden dragon with dazzling green eyes, and her children, Briam and Lioth.

Briam flew before his mother. He burned, white hot. His light guided them through the darkness, allowing them to cut a path through the dust and debris left over from the universe's demise. Lioth flew behind her mother. She possessed a soft, silvery glow, and every beat of her gossamer wings sent showers of sparkling lights trailing behind her.

Briam may have led the way, but it was Illumina who had determined their course.

Once they reached the center of this new universe, Illumina wrapped her wings around her massive body and curled up, nose to tail, floating in space. Her eyes fell shut, and she slipped into a deep slumber while Briam and Lioth flew circles around her, in an endless game of chase.

As Illumina slept, dust and debris from space settled upon her, forming ever-thickening layers of earth. The warmth of her body and her steady breaths stirred the dormant traces of life buried within the thick matter that had formed around her, giving birth to great forests, vast plains, rivers, and lakes.

In the center of this newly blossomed land, surrounded by a dense glen, stood the Soul Tree, which sprang directly from Illumina's heart. It stretched higher than any other tree. Its topmost branches were wreathed with clouds.

It was from there that Erebos, the gryphon, emerged. Through the Soul Tree, he communicated directly with Illumina, who remained aware of all things even as she slumbered.

Erebos raised his eagle head and scanned the landscape below. His wings snapped open. His lion limbs coiled then sprang, launching him into the air.

Erebos soared over the land, letting out a long resounding cry. As he did, new life emerged. Birds filled the sky, from the smallest sparrow to the greatest hawk. Fish of all sorts swam the waters while herds of wild horses and buffalo roamed the plains. Horned sheep ascended the mountain peaks, and the forests teemed with rabbits, deer, bears, wolves and lions. Tall, slender elves also appeared in the forests, while stout dwarves surfaced from their underground homes and timid humans peered from their caves.

His work complete, Erebos returned to his perch in the Soul Tree.

Illumina the dragon was now Illumina the world.

THE END

Chapter Two

Something lands on my shoulder. I cry out. Mr. Griffin stands next to me. He pulls his hand away like he's touched something hot.

The kids in class laugh. I groan, so embarrassed.

Mr. Griffin shuts them up with a stern look. He crouches beside me, smiling. "I called time a few minutes ago. Everyone else has already put away their Chromebooks."

"Sorry. I was –"

"*In the zone*, as you Americans like to say? Quite all right. Need any more time?"

I'm slow to answer. "No. I'm – good."

Everything's so hazy around me. It's like I'm not quite here. Like I'm still in the world of my story. I try to shake it off and go over what I wrote.

Wow, I did this? Me?

For starters, I can't remember ever writing so much in such a short time before in my life. It's everything from my daydream and more. It had all played out in front of me, and the words I needed to describe what I'd seen just came to me. I've never experienced anything like this.

I lean back in my chair, still in a daze. Everyone else around me is already at work on the next assignment. I upload my story to Google Classroom and hurry to put my Chromebook away.

"Ronnie." Mr. Griffin calls out. "I can't wait to read your story."

I smile all bashful. But proud too. That's ruined when Bianca shoots me an evil look. What's that about?

We're reading *Bridge to Terabithia*. Right now, we're in discussion groups, going over last night's assignment. Mr. Griffin puts me in a group with Bianca. I smile, trying to be nice. She smiles back, but totally phony.

There are two other boys in the group. One's tall and skinny with long black hair pulled back in a ponytail. Alex. The other one's shorter, not as short as me of course, with big shoulders and a big chest. Jeffrey. He's in my science class too.

"I know you haven't read the book, but that's okay," Bianca assures me. "I'll get you up to speed."

"I read it at my old school," I tell her.

"Oh. Good. But we had very detailed discussion questions to answer last night. You might be better off just listening."

Bianca doesn't even wait for me to respond. She just goes ahead and starts leading the discussion. She shares her answer to the first question then sets her paper down and flashes a big, satisfied smile.

Alex and Jeffrey agree with some of the things she said. Bianca looks like she expected this. But when they try to offer their own ideas about the reading, Bianca's quick to argue with them. It's as if her opinions about the book are the correct ones, and no one else's matter. We aren't even able to get through all of the discussion questions because of that she keeps arguing with Alex and Jeffrey.

Mr. Griffin calls the class back together, and we go over the discussion questions together. Bianca's hand is the first to go up. She shares her answer and sits back in her chair, waiting for Mr. Griffin's praise.

Instead, Mr. Griffin says, "Interesting. Thank you." He then turns to the class. "How about the rest of you? Did anyone come up with anything different?"

Bianca's mouth falls open a little. Mr. Griffin ignores her and calls on other people to share their answers. When they do, he asks them for more details to back up whatever they're trying to say. Some aren't sure what to say at first, but Mr. Griffin is real patient and gives them just the right amount of help they need to get to whatever it is they want to say.

He then checks the clock and wraps up the discussion – or at least tries to.

Bianca raises her hand really high to get his attention.

“Yes, Bianca,” says Mr. Griffin.

“Aren't you going to tell us what the author was really trying to say in this chapter?” she asks.

“I really don't know. I haven't had the pleasure of meeting Mrs. Paterson to be honest, so I've been unable to ask her.”

I chuckle. So do some of the other kids.

“But the study guide,” says Bianca. “You're supposed to be using the study guide.”

Mr. Griffin picks it up off the table. “This thing. I took it as more of a list of suggestions than anything.”

“But Mrs. Price always uses the study guide. It tells us what we're supposed to know, what we're supposed to learn from the book.”

“Actually, what it does is provide some shared interpretations of the book that are meant to spark your thinking, not simply tell you what to think. That's the beauty of literature or any form of art. It's open to interpretation. You make your own meaning. Reading a good story should be a personal journey. If you allow it to, reading a good story will transform you, leaving you better off for having read it.” Mr. Griffin glances at me from the corner of his eye. “Same holds true for *writing* a good story.”

I smile back. Everyone else slouches in their seats, checking their phones or whispering to their neighbors. None of them look the least bit interested in what Mr. Griffin just said. For some reason, I feel bad for them. It's like they missed out on something special.

Mr. Griffin hands out the homework and makes sure I get a copy of *Bridge to Terabithia* to read at home. The bell rings. I pick up my lunch from my locker and find a spot by myself in the cafeteria to eat. After lunch, my last two classes are Computers and the horror that is P.E. That kid, Alex, turns out to be in my computer class. He nods when he sees me. I nod back but don't have the nerve to try to sit at the station next to him.

The rest of the day, I keep waiting for another "visit" from the dragon – Illumina. Now that I know her name, I should probably call her by that. She's been bugging me for days, but ever since I wrote that story, there's been nothing. Is that all she wanted? For me to tell her story? I shut that thought out of my head. I mean, what am I thinking? She's not real. She's something I made up. How could she tell me what to do?

The final bell rings, and I head to my locker. Grandma is picking me up. I have an appointment with Dr. Hollis after school.

Something collides with me, sending me crashing into the wall of lockers.

My cry of pain is drowned out by a chorus of laughter.

"Oops, sorry there, shorty."

I turn to see three preppy boys standing behind me. The one in front wears an ear-to-ear grin, showing off perfect white teeth.

"Guess I didn't see you there. Because of you being so short and all," he says, patting me on the head.

My shoulder aches from where it hit the metal lockers, but I pretend it doesn't hurt.

"Excuse me," I mutter and try to pass.

The first boy pushes me back. "Whoa, whoa, hold on. Where are you going? Me and my friends want to know more about you. Like what's your deal? Did you skip some grades? Are you some kind of genius? Are you, what, eight, nine years old?"

"Maybe he's seven, Chad," says one of the other boys.

"I'm twelve," I mumble.

Chad leans in. "What was that? Squeak up?"

"I said I'm twelve," a little louder this time.

Chad and his friends laugh.

"Oh, my God," says the third boy. "No way."

Chad looks me up and down. "So, what's up with that? Are your parents, like, circus midgets or something?"

Mentioning my parents, I flashback to the night they died. I go numb. My body doesn't feel like it belongs to me anymore. My vision blurs as my eyes water up. I tug at the cuffs of my long sleeve shirt.

Chad sees me doing this and laughs. "And what's up with the long sleeve shirts, it's like ninety degrees out."

"Just let me go. Please," I say.

"Oh, come on," says Chad. "We're just trying to get to know you better. You're new, right? You want to make friends, don't you?"

My throat aches. I want to cry. I want to scream. Lucky for me, a couple of teachers pass by, clearing the halls of loitering students. Chad and his friends are distracted for a moment long enough for me to escape.

"See you tomorrow, little buddy," Chad calls out behind me, followed by him and his friends laughing.

My stomach is in knots. I try to breathe like Dr. Hollis taught me. I make it to the parking lot and spot Grandma's Mercedes parked at the curb. It's shinier than any other car around it. That's for sure. She gets it washed and waxed every couple of weeks whether it needs it or not. She takes just as much pride in her appearance too, always dressing up and never leaving the house without full makeup and jewelry, even when running errands.

She smiles and waves at me through the window. I toss my backpack in the backseat then sit in the passenger seat next to her.

"Are you okay?" she asks, reaching for me.

"I'm fine," I say.

"Are you sure? You look flushed."

"I just had P.E. It's my last class."

Grandma nods, studying me for a moment. She starts the car and pulls away from the curb. "So you made it through the whole day. That's great. I'm so proud of you. I know your grandpa will be too."

"Thanks."

"So how did everything go?"

"Okay."

Grandma makes a sad face. "That's all I get?"

"It's my first day. I don't know anyone yet."

"You'll make friends. Just be patient." She smiles and pats my leg. "What about your teachers? How are they?"

"They're okay." I smile a little. "My language arts teacher seems pretty cool. Mr. Griffin. He's just a sub though. I don't know how much longer he's going to be around." The thought of that makes me a little sad for some reason, which is weird seeing as how I've just met him.

“What did you do in his class today?”

“I wrote a story.”

“Really? What was it about?”

I start telling Grandma. But as I do, she tunes out. I should have seen it coming. Dragons, elves, and dwarves aren't exactly her kind of thing.

We get to Dr. Hollis' office. Each session always starts out the same way. She asks the same questions as always. Has my appetite improved? Am I sleeping okay? Have I gotten back into my old hobbies and interests?

Lately, she's been asking if I've gotten in touch with any of my friends at my old school. I haven't. I don't know why either. I just haven't. She then asks how my first day at my new school went. I tell her exactly what I told Grandma, word for word.

“I like that you wrote a story,” says Dr. Hollis. “And that you enjoyed writing it. Writing can be very therapeutic.”

Then, as usual, she asks me to relive “that night.” I don't want to. But she keeps telling me to try. Seriously, I don't want to – but suddenly I'm there again, waking up in the middle of the night, choking on smoke.

It floods my room, stinging my eyes. I panic and tumble from my bed. There's this roaring coming from outside. It sounds like an animal.

I yell for Mom and Dad. I pull the door open. Fire. It's everywhere, devouring the house all around me like an angry, hungry monster.

“Ronnie! Ronnie, over here!” Dad calls out.

He and Mom are at the other end of the hall, near their bedroom. I want to run to them, but I can't move. It's like my feet are stuck to the floor.

The ceiling groans as the fire continues to eat the house alive. Dad and Mom run toward me. There's a horrible crash. Mom cries out. Dad covers her with his body, as the ceiling collapses, burying them in flaming wreckage.

I scream. The flames gather in front of me. In the middle of them, there's a face, like a phantom with hollow eyes and a huge gaping mouth laughing at me. I try to look away but can't. The face in the flames grows larger as the fire spreads around me. My heart feels like it's going to fly out of my chest.

More wreckage falls from the ceiling. Finally, I can move. I hold up my arms to protect myself. They get bruised and burned. My legs buckle. I drop to the ground, thinking this is it, the end, when I'm suddenly swooped into the air.

It's a firefighter. Two more are behind him. He carries me down the stairs, protecting me from the flames, which still roar and growl like a monster. The other two try to dig out my parents.

"They'll be okay," I keep telling myself, trying not to pass out. "They'll be okay."

I don't remember much after that. Except waking up in the hospital with Grandpa and Grandma there, each holding one of my hands. Grandma weeps uncontrollably. Grandpa, the tough guy, wipes tears from his eyes.

Seeing Grandpa cry, probably for the first time in my life, tells me all I need to know about what had happened to Mom and Dad. He and Grandma tell me anyway. I'm numb to it all. They promise they'll take good care of me from now on. It's what my parents wanted.

That's it. No more. I snap back to the present. I'm shaking and almost out of breath. Dr. Hollis gives me a moment then pushes me to analyze every detail of that night like she always does.

She asks the same questions. Did I notice anything new this time? Is there anything I could have done differently? She tells me it was okay to be scared then asks if I think my mom and dad would want me to blame myself for what happened?

I say, no. But inside, in my heart, I don't feel it.

I tug at the cuffs of my long sleeve shirt.

"Are you ready to show me the burns on your arms yet? Are they still that bad?" She asks this every time. Every time I always say no. Today's no different.

Dr. Hollis nods and makes some notes on her pad. We talk more about coping skills, and she gives me two new techniques to practice. Dr. Hollis asks me to wait outside while she talks to Grandma. I drop into one of the big, plush chairs and settle in. Every bit of me relaxes. My eyes close part way, as I stare into a corner of the ceiling.

Slowly, the waiting room fades away, the soft furniture, soothing pictures, and music vanish. And Illumina appears. Not the dragon. The world.

I float over the land, watching the different elf tribes track and hunt animals in the forests. From there, I slip underground to see the dwarves mining ore and gems and working them into weapons, tools, and treasures over searing hot forges.

Across the plains, the humans build farms and villages. Years pass in moments. Kingdoms are born. Then come the monsters. Giants storm down from the Dragonback Mountains to raid villages. There are gangs of centaurs, vicious snake men, evil mages, and pitiless hunters of men like the manticore.

It's not hopeless though. There are heroes ready to face them. One of them is young, but people all over Illumina are already talking about him. He travels with a giant wolf and carries an enchanted sword. He's tall, strong and brave. Everything I'm not.

If you want to read the rest of *Illumina*, you can purchase the eBook or paperback at Amazon.com!

[I Want It Now!](#)

If you enjoy the book, please leave a review on Amazon.

Thank you,

Dan O'Mahony