

THE UNBREAKABLE BOARD

and the *Red Dragon Surprise*

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ISBN 978-0-9792697-1-4

eISBN 978-0-9792697-8-3

Published by Wind School

16 Braidburn Way

Convent Station, New Jersey 07960

Book Design by Kathleen Otis

Cover Image by Canva AI

Illustrations by Ian Mikraz Akbar

Printed In the United States of America

The red poster flapped in the breeze like a banner welcoming a victorious army, until a skinny, freckled arm tacked it to the knotty telephone pole. Now, any passerby strolling Main Street could see the picture of a powerful-looking Japanese man shattering a three hundred pound block of ice with the palm of his hand. Underneath the picture it read:

**13th Annual
Red Dragon Dojo
Demonstration**

**Special Guest,
O Sensei
World's Greatest Japanese
Tameshiwara
Master
Saturday, March 28th**

Willie stared at the poster for the thirty-ninth time. He had hung eight of them along Wellington Avenue, his home street, and thirty-one along Main Street.



The Red Dragon Karate School's most important event was only two weeks away. William W. Dean and five other Red Dragons had volunteered to hang the big, colorful flyers all around town. Everyone was invited to see Japan's greatest *Tameshiwara* master. *Tameshiwara* is the Japanese art of breaking. O Sensei could crush stones with the blade of his bare hand, poke bricks in half with his fingers, smash mattress-thick slabs of ice with his palm, tear telephone books in two, and even snap out of titanium police handcuffs. But in his most famous feat, the karate grandmaster could break any brick in a tall stack without cracking a single other.

Willie tried to remember what the word *tameshiwara* meant but Japanese words made him think of the oddest things. All he could picture in his mind was a *washing* machine.

O Sensei was the founder of Red Dragon Karate International. He had thousands of followers in eighteen countries. *O Sensei* means 'great teacher' in Japanese. The grandmaster was flying from Osaka, Japan, 7,000 miles away. His plane was arriving in fourteen days. The last time O Sensei had visited Willie's town was in the summer of 1986 before Willie was even born to award his top American student, Stephen Lee, a Master teaching certificate. Master Lee was Willie's *sensei* (teacher). Willie was ten years old and hoped to become a black belt someday. He had been a Red Dragon for two years and proudly wore a blue belt. In Willie's school blue belt came right before green belt. And green belt was halfway to the expert rank of black belt.

Red Dragon karate students sponsored five volunteer community events each year to raise money for poor families in Appalachia and, this year, to

help pay for O Sensei's airfare to the United States.

Willie rolled up the last poster to bring home and hang on his bedroom wall. He admired O Sensei's power shattering the giant ice slabs. He glanced at the big brass clock atop Marvin's Jewelers. It was 4:40 p.m. If he ran he could make his 5:00 karate class.

Five minutes later Willie arrived at the thick wooden door of the Red Dragon Karate School. The Dojo was wedged between Sages Pages, the local bookstore, and Almo's Pet Shop where Willie bought his first iguana. He pried the heavy door open and raced up the steep stairwell to the second floor studio. Then he bee-lined for the boy's changing room where he washed his hands, pulled off his sweat pants and T-shirt, piled them into an empty locker and slipped into his baggy white cotton *gi*. With his blue *obi* cinched around his thin waist Willie looked like a boy stuffed into oversized, ruffled white pajamas. Willie's favorite part of his karate uniform was the Red Dragon patch on his sleeve. The dragon's snarling face reminded him of his pet iguana before it pounced on a cricket.

Willie's bare, freckled feet stepped out of the locker room onto a cool, polished wood training floor. The Red Dragon Dojo was divided into two training spaces called the Upper and Lower. The Lower was a shiny oak wood floor. The Upper consisted of a raised platform especially built by Master Lee with a thick, springy pad on top. When the class warmed up with jumping jacks, the Upper bounced up and down like a humongous trampoline and Willie's long, wavy red hair would rise and fall like flames on a log. Willie heard that the spongy mat lay atop old car tires to give it extra bounce. The dojo also had a high ceiling with big, overhead moon-shaped lights.

No one was allowed on the Upper without a clean, properly worn uniform. Willie had learned in his first class that it was disrespectful for a karate student to come to class dirty or sloppily dressed.

A loud *thwack-clap, thwack-clap, thwack-clap* echoed throughout the spacious room. Three older boys on the Lower were punching *makiwaras*. When Willie had first heard the word *makiwara* he thought it was a kind of Japanese macaroni. Master Lee burst into laughter when Willie asked him why he was talking about macaroni in a karate class. He explained that the *makiwaras* were striking posts. Six of them were bolted along the rim of the Upper. They were just like the devices karate masters used a hundred years ago in Okinawa with a few minor adjustments. But only the older students

could use them because the bones in children's hands were not fully formed until the middle teens. Each post had two wood slats screwed together several inches from one another.

When the boys struck the makiwara the front pieces slammed into the back ones making them clack like an old locomotive chugging along the rails. The ancient masters on the tiny island of Okinawa, where karate began, used to tie a crude rope called hemp around a piece of wood and punch it until their knuckles ached. Some struck it so many times that it tore the skin from their bones! There were three different kinds of makiwara each with their own name. They were called the *Shuri*, the *Naha*, and the *Ude*. The Shuri makiwara was the tallest. It stood as high as Sensei's chest and was used for punching from a short stance. Shuri was named after the old capital city of Okinawa. The Naha makiwara was the shortest of the three. You had to hunker down into a deep *zenkutsu dachi* (forward leaning stance) to punch it. The Ude makiwara was round, which made it good for both punching and kicking. To prevent injuring the growth plates in children's hands the youngest students practiced on twelve foam pads hung near the weapons' wall. They gave a rubbery *pop* when they were struck.

Willie watched several older boys launch rapid-fire fists into the posts. *Punch-thwack-clap, punch-thwack-clap, punch-punch-thwack-clap*. Their punches sounded like giant woodpeckers.

More students stepped onto the Upper. Some stretched. Others rehearsed karate chops and kicks. Four orange belts huddled together in a circle. A group of young kids started a game of tag.

"Well, are you signing in *freckle face*?" a tall, broad-shouldered boy, standing behind Willie, asked. It was Jack Strutt, the new teenager. Jack had joined the Red Dragon School three weeks ago. He pushed Willie aside to sign in. "Oh! *Sorry*," he smirked.

Willie had been daydreaming about the old karate masters and wondered if they had the power to split their makiwaras in half. After Jack signed in, Willie stepped over to the attendance sheet. The white, sign-in sheet lay on a small table in front of a large wooden support. It read:

**RED DRAGON—YOUTH KARATE CLASS— WEDNESDAY
—5:00 SIGN-IN.**

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