


BLACK  
WATER



LAKE OF  
SECRETS

JAMES ERWIN

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by  
*James Erwin*



Strategic Book Group

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*For the brave and courageous men and women; past,  
present and future; of the Jackson County Dive Unit  
(Wisconsin)—the real JCDU—and all those in Public Ser-  
vice who have passed before us.*

# Acknowledgements

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# Preface

*Black Water* is a work of fiction. The people and incidents portrayed are the product of this writer's fertile imagination.

Having said that, the *type* of people portrayed, particularly on the part of the Dive Unit personnel, are not imaginary. Such people do exist. In fact, they are probably very likely among you, right now, in your own community. In nearly every county in every State in the Union; and in most places around the world; there are amazing people who stand ready to respond when tragedy happens in or around the water. These brave souls may be a couple of guys with their own gear—known to the local authorities—who volunteer to show up when duty calls; all the way to fully staffed, full-time employed Responders who regularly patrol inland and coastal waters. From civilian volunteers to certified Law Enforcement, the span of men and women who serve this little known field of Public Service is vast.

These are true heroes who are on deck and ready; day or night, fair weather or foul; to carry out their sworn duties with all diligence. Chances are you rarely notice them. They do a job few see. They do a job few can do. They do a job even fewer *will* do. What is more, their selfless efforts serve a need many of us fail to even recognize.

Most Public Safety Dive Teams train to carry out both rescue and recovery operations. The hope is always to save a life if possible. Sadly, most of the time, their efforts are directed toward recovering the victims of drowning or other fatal water-related incidents. Their primary purpose in doing this is to reunite survivors with their lost loved ones.

Every time a Public Safety Diver goes into the water he or she puts their life on the line. They almost certainly never face the malicious acts portrayed in this novel. But the dangers are still just as real. The term “black water” is very apt.

With a few exceptions, most Public Safety Operations are conducted in water the color of coffee and impossible to see through. What is concealed in that blackness is impossible to predict. It may be discarded construction debris; broken concrete, twisted rebar, wire mesh. In rural areas it may be old barbed wire fencing, submerged underwater, created by flooded pastureland, long abandoned. Underwater vegetation ranging from simple seaweed to entire trees is always a possibility. Entanglement is a perpetual hazard that lies hidden in the dark places where these incredible people carry out their difficult work. Most do so without pay and without public recognition, and, remarkably, most do so without wanting either.

They do what they do because they believe that they have to. In one way or another every diver who does this kind of work has to have a similar selflessness. Without it they would never get in or near the water. That same sense of duty follows for the even more numerous team members above water—the support personnel—who provide all of the support systems that make possible the efforts of the divers underwater.

We live in an age when heroism is a label attached to many. Most, truly, deserve the distinction. But it is well to remember those who carry on acts of heroism in places few will ever see. These are the men and women who are...

Public Safety Divers.





# 1

Below the surface of the clear and cool water, Ethan Grey swam effortlessly through a world locked in time. His worn and well-used scuba unit clung to his back like a natural part of his body. Fish darted about like aquatic butterflies, barely taking notice of the dark form passing among them.

This was the world where Grey felt most at ease. In this weightless universe he could allow his mind to rest. At the moment he was just another fish. For the hour or so that he would be amongst these quiet creatures he could push the demons and dark images from his troubled mind as he relished in the simple freedom that came with a journey into this underwater world.

Above, the early morning air was warm, especially for west-central Wisconsin on the fourth of June. The scent of pine lingered on a gentle breeze. The phosphorescent sun shown through a clear, still sky as its radiance caressed the smooth expanse of Lake Clearwater. In the distance, out of sight, a loon's cry welcomed the daybreak. Overhead, a bald eagle soared, riding the rising air currents in search of a hearty breakfast. A multitude of songbirds raised a chorus in the oak and maple trees surrounding the lake, pronouncing the day started.

Ethan was alone on this dive. It was not a practice that he would generally endorse. As a certified Dive Master, he knew the importance of always diving with a buddy. There were a host of social reasons for that, but the most important aspect was safety—plain and simple. A couple of years ago no one could have made Ethan dive solo. He tended to be

a stickler for proper procedures. But lately, he found it increasingly important for his peace of mind to make this time for himself.

Ethan glanced at his instrument console as he had every couple of minutes since the start of the dive. Perhaps that was why he was able to push his other concerns from his mind on these forays. His attention to detail had long ago helped him develop a habit of constantly checking his equipment and the status of his dive; bottom time, air level, and depth. Whether he was paddling around fish cribs in fifteen feet of water in this lake or exploring a boiler off an ore boat sunk long ago at a hundred and thirty feet on the bottom of Lake Superior made no difference.

As he glanced once more at his gauges, Ethan noticed his air supply read 800 psi. Time to meander back to his entry point.

\* \* \*

Unbeknown to Ethan as he gradually disappeared in the distance, three other divers made their way along a rocky incline on their first dive in Lake Clearwater. As they passed submerged trees and bushes, freshwater fish—bass, bluegills, and the odd walleyed pike—would scatter warily at their approach. Occasionally, a bass or bluegill would actually advance toward one of the strange-looking aquatic creatures rather than flee the bubble blowing behemoths. When a diver would stop moving, one of the more curious fish would ease its way right up to the his face mask, see a perfect twin of itself, and pick at it curiously.

The underwater world here was like a moment stopped in time. Trees that were once vibrant and growing above the water's surface were now suspended in a liquid world. Finned and scaled creatures replaced feathered beings in this surreal universe as they "flew" among the now leafless branches. The divers joined in the weightless parade through the treetops, hovering over the more interesting sights like great over-sized hummingbirds, motionless, lest they disturb the alien world around them.

As the three dive buddies worked their way along the steep incline of the underwater terrain, one gradually drifted away from his companions. As the remaining pair paused to inspect an underwater feature more closely, the third continued ahead obliviously and slowly dropped to a depth of fifty feet.

As he glanced up to peruse an odd rock formation, the lone diver suddenly caught the impression of motion farther ahead and above him. Unsure if he had actually seen anything, he looked closer, trying to position himself to get a clearer angle from which to see. Suddenly he realized that he did, in fact, see something moving just at the edge of his range of vision, perhaps forty or fifty feet away.

Curiosity being the catchword of the day, the unwary diver swam closer to this strange figure in the distance. There were supposed to be larger fish in the lake, or so they had been informed. Perhaps this was one of them. On the other hand, it could also be just another diver. They knew of a couple other dive groups in the lake this day and whatever it was looked to be about the size of a man, at least from a distance. Moving closer, though, the diver could just make out something odd. Could that possibly be a *tail* of some sort?

The excited aquanaut picked up his pace, kicking a little faster, wanting to get a closer look at this unusual underwater specimen. Such a creature could hardly be dangerous, at least not in this part of the world. This was not the ocean. There were no sharks in Wisconsin. This was not the bayou. There were no alligators or crocodiles here. As he watched, the strange fish-like “thing” seemed to move deeper, turning almost on an intercept course with the diver. If he could just bide his time, perhaps it would come right up to him.

But as the unusual being came closer, moving awkwardly along the bottom of the lake, the diver became apprehensive, realizing that, rather than being smaller, this “thing” was, in fact, considerably larger than he was! Perhaps twice his size!

These divers had never dove this lake before. They had been told that it had been an abandoned open pit iron mine,

reclaimed and turned into a park after the mining operations had been shut down in the mid-80's and left to fill in over time with groundwater. The clean, fresh water combined with the rocky terrain of the lakebed made for an extremely clear environment to dive in. "One of the clearest inland bodies of water in the region outside the Great Lakes", was what everybody had said. Because it was man-made, all the fish in the lake had been stocked there intentionally. But—this "beast"! Who would put something like that in the lake?

As the increasingly anxious diver settled down to the bottom of the lakebed, trying to become as inconspicuous as possible, the menacing-looking creature worked its way toward the diver's position. As he lay there, still and motionless, the diver could now see that this "thing" was indeed large. And it did have a tail of sorts. Including the tail, it looked as if it really were two or even three times as large as he was, and it seemed as if it were growing larger by the minute! An aura of panic rapidly settled over the diver like a fever!

When the "creature" was only fifteen feet away or so, it suddenly stopped. To the, now, terrified diver's shock, the "beast" actually looked directly at him! Its eyes seemed as large as saucers, black and menacing. It looked as if it had huge, leering fangs filling its gaping mouth. Tremendous claws hung from massive-looking webbed feet. The diver was certain this hellish aquatic demon could tear him limb from limb!

As the diver stayed his place, praying that the horrific monster would simply pass him by, it suddenly reached out one of its evil-looking claws in his direction. It was all the hapless diver could take!

Violating every safety rule in any basic scuba manual, the diver, now overcome with uncontrolled terror, raced for the surface as fast as he could force his fins to propel him. From a distance, his two companions saw his missile-like ascent and immediately knew that their friend was in big trouble once he reached the surface. They realized that, with such

a rapid assent, it was almost inevitable that their dive buddy would suffer “the bends”, a dangerous medical condition in which nitrogen bubbles would leach from his tissues too quickly, resulting in a painful, if not potentially fatal, condition.

With the two divers’ attention riveted upon their companion’s dilemma, the “creature”—this thing that was the cause of the diver’s reckless action—moved off unseen but watched *them* as it worked along the bottom toward shore.

Using extreme caution not to repeat their panicked friend’s behavior, the two remaining divers ascended more slowly as they made their way to the stricken man’s location. When the two men reached their buddy at the water’s surface, the tranquility of the day’s beginning had been thoroughly shattered. The frenzied man thrashed about in the water, screaming hideously and fighting all attempts to calm him. When the two men had failed to subdue the overwrought man, one of them swam to shore to call for help.

As the diver made his way toward shore, his horror-struck, and now quivering, friend screamed like a man possessed: “It’s a monster! Dear god! It’s some kind of monster!”

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