

Reading the Sky

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CHAPTER ONE

Jamie in the Clouds

The summer of 1972 was one of the hottest summers in years. The twelve-year-old boy was standing in the middle of a field, sweating. Not that he cared. Head tilted back, arms wide to pretend he was flying, he stared at the sky. It was bright blue, blossoming with great billowing clouds. Perfect. He could see marvelous things in clouds: castles, dragons, knights, charging horses. He saw fine ladies, great men. When an airplane arched across the sky, he saw a spear being thrown. He could see it all by watching the sky. *This is better*, he thought, *than books*.

“Jamie! Jamie Peters!” The boy’s name floated over the long meadow. Though he knew it was his grandmother calling, he tried to ignore her. But when the call came again, he turned. “Coming!” he shouted, and started to run.

As he did every summer, Jamie had come from Rochester, New York, to spend the month with his grandparents. His parents would join him for the last couple of weeks. Grandpa and Grandma Thornton lived in Pennsylvania, ten miles south of the New York border. The closest big town was Elmira, twenty-five miles to the northeast.

The land rolled like ocean waves, making endless valleys and hills. Rocks were everywhere: rock walls, rock patches, and just plain rocks. Grandpa Thornton, who could be sarcastic, called the area a boulder garden. Down the road was a farm called Iron Acres. The closest town was Stoneville.

Happy with his visions on the hill, Jamie gave his grandmother a hug. She was in her sixties, and to Jamie as soft, as easy as anyone in the world. She was a bit like his mother, but his mother was usually in a rush. Grandma always had time for him, or for the afternoon naps she loved.

“What have you been doing?” she asked as she led him back into the house.

“Cloud watching. Know what I saw?”

“Nobody does but you.”

“King Arthur and his knights. Sir Lancelot threw a silver spear—fifty miles—and killed the Dark Knight!”

“Jamie, did he really?”

“He did.”

Grandma laughed. “Jamie, honey, you see more things in the sky than most people see on earth.”

“I really saw it,” he insisted.

“How about a snack?” Grandma asked. On the kitchen table was a glass of milk and a plate with three doughnuts. At home there would have been only one doughnut. Jamie swallowed the milk in one gulp and then began on the doughnuts.

“Nobody believes what I see,” he said, mouth full.

“Well, no one sees the way you do. You have special eyes.”

Jamie, who hated talking about his dyslexia—his difficulty with reading—changed the subject. “How come you called me?”

“Grandpa went over to Mr. Lurie’s to help fix a pump. Then he called to say he forgot some wrench, and could you bring it to him. You can bike over. He’ll drive you back.”

“The Luries?” A note of unease crept into Jamie’s voice.

“Perfectly nice neighbors. Do your grandfather a favor.”

“Okay.”

Mrs. Thornton looked about the kitchen. “Hmmm . . . I wrote out exactly what he asked for. Where are my reading glasses?” She slipped a piece of paper toward Jamie. “Help me out, honey.”

Jamie, feeling a familiar tenseness, reluctantly picked up the paper. As he looked at the letters that his grandmother had written, he suddenly grew hot. His head began to ache. He stared at the shapes and tried to remember what the letters were. This was his reading problem: no matter how often he studied letters, they seemed only vaguely familiar.

He looked hard at the first letter. It was as if it wouldn’t stay still:

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He reached out, pointed above the letter, and drew it in the air—or at least tried to. Line down. Line across. Line down! Line across!

Mrs. Thornton, watching him, suddenly remembered. “Oh, Jamie!” she cried. “I’m sorry. How could I have forgotten?”

Jamie, ashamed, kept his eyes down as he shoved the paper back to his grandmother. Mrs. Thornton held it at arm’s length so she could read. “Two-inch spanner,” she said out loud.

Having lost his appetite for the last doughnut, Jamie heaved himself up, marched to the basement, got the tool, and shoved it into his back pocket.

Mrs. Thornton followed him to his bike.

“Jamie,” she said gently. “I’m sorry. I sometimes forget about the dyslexia, don’t I?”

Jamie shrugged.

“Honey, you have the best imagination in the world,” she said with forced cheer. “And I love your being here with us.” She gave him a hug.

“So do I,” Jamie said, relaxing. He looked up at her. “Grandma, I know I don’t *really* see those things in the sky. But, you know, I do all the same, sort of.”

“I think it’s wonderful,” she replied. “It’s your way of reading. You read things in the sky like nobody else.”

Jamie grinned. “That’s for sure,” he said.

“Now, tie your laces and scoot,” she said with a smile. “Grandpa is waiting.”



Meanwhile, a few hundred miles away, something else was happening. On the observation deck at the Philadelphia International Airport, Ed Goddard, a twenty-eight-year-old man, rested his elbows on a railing and watched

the jets land and take off. For the millionth time, he asked himself the same question: *Could I steal the money from a plane, then parachute down so that no one would find me? Sure I could.* He smiled. *Hey, nobody ever watches the sky.*

(To be continued.)

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