

Chapter One



Josh studied the sky and pondered, *If I could just hop on one of those clouds and drift off to some other land and start a new life and*

“All right class, get with your lab partner and browse through the list of scientists I’ve handed out. By next week, you’ll have to choose one for your research paper,” said Mr. Bryson, the biology teacher.

Kim glanced at Josh, who cradled his head in his hands. She grabbed her notebook and moved toward him.

“Yo, partner,” Kim said, amazed that Josh didn’t even notice her approach. She knocked her knuckles on his desk. “Earth to Josh!”

“Oh, hi, Kim. What’s up?”

“Duh, our science project ... Josh, you feel okay?” Kim asked. “You seem, like, foggy or something. Did you even hear what Mr. Bryson told us?”

“Sorry, Kim,” Josh said and shook the fantasies out of his mind. “I was off somewhere else.”

“Josh, can I ask you something straight out?”

“I guess so,” Josh replied hesitantly.

“Are you okay with me as your partner? I’m not as smart as you, but I’ll pull my weight,” Kim promised. “All of it!” She slapped her chunky hip.

Josh smiled and relaxed. “I’m not so sure I am smarter than you, Kim. If you can write as well as you cut up frog guts last week, we’ll be an awesome team.”

Josh stole one final peek out the window at the clouds.

—

Josh’s eyes focused on the kitchen wall clock. He asked himself, *It’s ten o’clock ... do you know where your mother is? No idea!*

Earlier in the evening, he had phoned her office. No answer. After fixing a cheese sandwich for dinner and attempting to do his homework, Josh considered checking the local hospital but dialed the office again. When her answering machine began its leave-a-message speech, he hung up.

What do I do now? Josh wondered. *She’s been late before, but never this late. I sure can’t talk to Dad about this. And you can’t report a ‘missing mom’ to the police when it’s only been a few hours. I don’t know if I’m more scared or furious.*

The ring interrupted his thoughts. He bolted from the sofa and sprinted to the phone in the kitchen.

“Hello?”

Josh listened to the unfamiliar voice on the other end of the phone and leaned his back against the wall until the talking stopped. “Okay, thanks.” He reflexively hung up the phone.

“Geez!” His knees buckled, and his body slowly slid to the floor. *Thanks a lot, Mom,* he muttered.