

Lights Out!

Chapter One

“Mom, can Matthew let his balloon go?” Ben Nelson asked early one September morning. Mom was getting breakfast ready for the Nelson family, who lived on a farm in Tennessee. Ben was seven years old, and tried to be a good big brother to Matthew, age four, and Leah, who was a year and a half old.

Matthew had received a white helium balloon with the words “Get Well Soon!” from his grandfather a few days earlier. Matthew had been sick with a sore throat and fever over the weekend, and as Granddad had been visiting at the Nelsons’, he had bought the balloon to help cheer Matthew up. Before coming to live with the Nelsons, Matthew had lived in an orphanage in Russia with his baby sister, Leah, whom the family had also adopted.

“I suppose so,” Mom said hesitantly. “Are you sure he really wants to let his balloon go? Or is this an idea of one of the bigger boys?” she finished, a little suspicion in her voice.

“Oh, no ma’am,” Ben assured her. “It’s his idea. Last night he let it go by accident and it went way up to the top of the foyer. Jason had to stand on a chair to get it back down again. Then Andy told Matthew that if he let it go outside, it would float away, all the way up in the sky as far as anybody could see. Matthew wants to see that. So do I!”

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“You let a balloon loose once,” Mom reminded him.

“Yes, ma’am, I remember doing it, but it was a pretty old balloon, and didn’t go up very far.” Then he asked again, “So, can Matthew do it, Mom?”

“Yes, that’s fine,” Mom replied.

“Thanks! Then he’s going to do it right now! If you want to see it, come on out . . .” Ben said, his voice fading as he raced out of the kitchen.

Ben arrived in the living room out of breath and announced Mom’s decision to the waiting group of boys.

“So, what do you want me to write on it?” thirteen-year-old Jason asked Matthew. He held a black marker poised over the balloon’s blank surface.

Ever since the boys could remember, they had written words on the helium balloons that they released, just in case someone found them.

Matthew thought a bit about what should go on the balloon. Finally, he said, “Hi, God.”

Jason didn’t start writing. He wasn’t sure if he should write that on a balloon. He didn’t want to do anything wrong, or seem irreverent. “Why that?” he asked.

Matthew didn’t hesitate. “Mom says that God is up in heaven. My balloon is going to go way up, maybe up to heaven. I want it to say ‘Hi’ to God, if it goes that high.”

This seemed to satisfy Jason, and he began to write. “I went ahead and added your name, too,” he informed.

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Matthew smiled broadly. "If God sees it, He'll know who sent it, 'cause He knows everything!"

The boys all trooped out of the house and into the front yard, the balloon floating behind them.

"Not too close to the trees," cautioned eleven-year-old Andy. "We got one stuck in there one time."

"And not too close to the house," added Ben, "else it might get stuck on the gutters, or chimney, or something."

Matthew stood in the middle of the driveway, and received final instructions on the proper way to release a balloon. Apparently there was definitely a right way and a wrong way to do it. "Just hold it with your thumb and one finger, and sort of flick it like you're brushing hay off your arm," and "Don't blow on it as you let it go," and "Remember to sort of throw it up in the air at the same time you let go," the boys told him. But most of these seemed to fall on deaf ears, because Matthew just suddenly, and without warning, closed his eyes and flung the balloon out in front of him. Maybe it was the way Matthew released it that caused the balloon to drift dangerously down toward the ground. For whatever reason, the balloon could barely gain altitude. Slowly it inched upward, but always with an occasional lazy drop in altitude. It looked like it was going to fly onto a small tree nearby, but then slowly drifted toward the barn.

Matthew was all smiles. "There it goes," he announced triumphantly. "'Bye, balloon! Have a good trip." He waved and stared at the white orb in the early morning light.

Jason was not all smiles. Being much older, he saw that things were not going well for the official

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launching of this balloon. He knew from experience that it wasn't going to go way up into heaven. In fact, it probably wasn't even going to go as high as the tallest trees. More likely it would be down on the ground in a few minutes, or maybe tangled in the shrubbery. He made a wise suggestion. "Say, I'm hungry, boys. Let's go see if breakfast is ready!"

His plan worked beautifully, and the boys went streaming back into the house, happily chattering about balloons they had released in the past, speculating on what finally became of them, and wondering what was going to be for breakfast.

As he neared the doorway, Jason looked back toward the barn to see what was happening with Matthew's balloon. He half-expected to see it stuck in a tree, but was surprised to find he couldn't see the balloon anywhere. Perhaps it had finally taken off into the sky after all. *That's good*, he thought.

Then his brain registered something else he had seen when he looked toward the barn, but hadn't taken the time to think about yet. He turned and looked back again, expecting that what he thought he saw the first time really wasn't there. But his brain had been right. There it was. A light shining in the barn. A light that definitely should not be on at this time of the morning. No one had been out there yet. What could that mean? Who, or what, was behind it?