

## Chapter One

### Changes, Changes, Changes

Benjamin Ignatius Ronald Dunavin lined up his scuffed tennis shoe and gave the empty can a ferocious kick. He was doing his best to ignore the shouts from his older brother, David.

“Bird! Stop messing around and get your butt in gear,” Dave called. “We’ve got to get home and do chores to do before Mom gets there. I haven’t got all day to walk you home from school. You’re going to have to do this by yourself from now on. The new house isn’t that far away, and I was doing it by the time I was your age.”

Bird scowled, yanked his baseball cap lower and took aim at the can again.

Scott, his “almost twin,” ran back toward him and spoiled his shot. Scott was older than Bird by less than a year, but he was shorter and skinnier. Scott was sick when he was a baby, and Mom said that he just hadn’t caught up yet.

Bird and Scott were in the fifth grade, which Mom said made things easier for her. Bird thought it made things harder for him. Just because Scott was older, he thought he knew more and that he could boss Bird around.

“Whaddya want?” Bird grumbled as he moved to the side to kick the can from another angle.

Scott adjusted his square-framed black glasses and pushed his light brown hair back from his forehead. He had just run a whole block back to his brother. He was out of breath, and he didn’t like to sweat.

“David says that you have to hurry. We are supposed to unpack more of the boxes in our rooms. It has to be finished before Mom gets home. He wants to play his new video game after dinner. If our chores are not done, then Mom will not let him.”

Bird eyed his brother, taking in his serious expression as he stood there with his hands on his hips, and squinted his hazel-colored eyes. His mouth was slightly open and his two front teeth had not only caught up, but grown way beyond the rest of his body.

Bird shrugged. "Not my problem."

"Yes, it is," Scott insisted. "I thought you wanted to try out for that new baseball team?"

That got Bird's attention.

Baseball was his favorite sport. Gram had taught him the basics. Over his mother's objections she had signed him up for his first coach-pitch team when he was only six. She always helped him get to practices and was there at every game. Mom avoided the whole subject of baseball. She seemed to hate the game and didn't even want him to watch games on television. But he had enjoyed watching games for as long as he could remember. He wished he knew why his mother hated it so much.

Dave had helped him with his throwing and catching. After playing two seasons a year for three years, he was a solid fielder and one of the most consistent hitters on his old team.

His old team. Bird could feel a knot growing in his throat. All of that team's fans knew his name and always cheered for him. He was somebody on that team. The knot in his throat got bigger, and he gave the can a vicious kick.

Scott jumped out of the way. "You almost hit me, Benjamin!"

"Bird! I've been telling you since I could talk that my name is Bird!"

Scott had a smirky little smile. No one was sure if it was intentional or not, but it always got under Bird's skin. "Nope," he said matter of factly. "Mom named you Benjamin Ignatius Ronald Douglas. I was there when you were born."

"You might have been around, but you don't remember!" Bird growled.

“Yes, I do. Mom said you were the last boy she was ever going to have, so she named you after all your great-grandfathers.”

That annoying smile was on Scott’s face again, and it was bigger. He loved to repeat the story he’d heard Mom tell friends, relatives, and strangers a thousand times.

Scott was a know-it-all, in more ways than one. Mom called him the “smart” one, just because he usually made perfect scores on his spelling, history, and reading tests. He made good grades in science and math, too, but Bird was excellent in those two subjects. Numbers just came easy for him and he liked to do problems in his head. He even liked the word problems. He didn’t mind reading them. Science was just fun. Bird loved doing experiments. He almost smiled remembering the rocket he had made in Mrs. Brady’s class last year.

But she was still at the old school on the other side of town teaching fourth grade. Now Bird lived in a new house and attended a new school. He was in a new grade with new kids and new teachers. There weren’t any familiar faces. Even worse he didn’t have a place on this school’s baseball team. They played in the fall and the spring in this part of Texas. Some boys didn’t play both seasons, choosing instead to focus on football in the fall. They were going to have tryouts, so he might get a spot. He desperately wanted one. If he was on a team, he’d have a place where he fit.

He started to trot toward David, his fifteen-year-old brother who was in high school. David had already secured a starting position at defensive end for the Varsity football team. He didn’t seem bothered by all of the changes. But Dave was more than six-feet tall. He lifted weights and he had muscles you could see. Bird figured that his oldest brother wasn’t afraid of anything. He even liked the super scary movies that Bird didn’t want to watch but did anyway. It

gave him a chance to hang out with Dave and some of the older guys. Scotty didn't watch, and he didn't care. He was happy to go to his room to practice piano or read a book.

Bird broke into a full run, putting more distance between himself and Scott, who was struggling to keep up. "Dave, hey, David, wait up!"

David looked over his shoulder at Bird. The sturdily built, brown-eyed, brown-haired boy pumped his legs as fast as he could. Bird closed the distance between them pretty fast. He thought Dave might have slowed his steps by a fraction. His oldest brother rarely cut him much slack.

Bird thought Dave was lucky. Changes never seemed to bother him. He just took everything in stride everywhere he went. David hadn't changed schools, so he still had all of his friends. Dave's life was better in the new house, too. He had a bigger room. At least I don't have to share a room with Scott anymore, Bird thought. Maybe some changes weren't so bad.

"Hey, Bird-Boy," Dave said as his brother caught up with him and leapt into the air for a self-congratulatory high five. He smacked Bird's hand loud enough for the sound to echo off the houses that lined the street. Scott would hear and be a little jealous, but Bird didn't care.

"How was school today?" Dave inquired.

Bird pulled his cap off, wiped his forehead, and put it back on at an angle as he struggled to match his strides to Dave's. He shrugged as he looked up at his brother. "It was okay, I guess. They have a real gym at this school, so we don't have to have P.E. in the cafetorium like we did at Wimberly. They don't even have any portable buildings here."

Eagleton Elementary was the newest school in town. Its state-of-the-art computers and high-tech classrooms were among the reasons their mother had picked a house in this neighborhood. They'd been searching for a house of their own for awhile. Mom had been picky.

This one had everything she wanted: a bedroom for each of them, a big kitchen, two full bathrooms, a huge garage, and a fireplace. It also had a big backyard with real grass, not like the beaten down, packed dirt in the one they used to rent. There was a big old tree with branches that would support a tree house. Yeah, Bird thought, maybe the new house is a really good change.

“My science teacher is a man, and my math teacher is a woman,” Bird reported. “It’s just the opposite of the way it was last year. And since we’re in fourth grade now, we have to change rooms for different classes. I didn’t really know my way around ‘cause we missed the Back-to-School night.”

Dave cast a sidelong glance at his brother and noticed the unhappy look on his face.

“Did you get lost?” he asked.

The unhappy look deepened, and the faintest shine of tears clouded his brown eyes before Bird sniffed and nodded. He looked up at his brother, hoping Dave wouldn’t take the opportunity to tease him. The scuffle of Scott’s shoes behind them gave Bird greater cause for concern. The middle-brother would broadcast the news of Bird’s misfortune to everyone.

“Bummer,” was all Dave said. He dropped a hand to Bird’s shoulder and gave it a quick squeeze. “We can talk about it later if you want.”

“Yeah, that would be good,” Bird said as he straightened his shoulders and swiped an arm across his face.

“You guys did not wait for me,” Scott accused as he joined them. “We are supposed to get home quick, and get our chores and homework done before Mom gets home. She told me she would make a special dessert.”

Scott had a huge sweet tooth, or maybe it was both of his large front teeth. It amazed everyone that such a skinny little guy could consume as much food as he did. Anything with

sugar went into his mouth ahead of everything else. When they went to a buffet, he always tried to hit the dessert bar first and sometimes Mom just let him. Bird figured she just got tired of dealing with the little professor's twisted logic. Their grandmother always said, "Scott could argue the stripes off a tiger."

"Dave, can you throw some with me?" Bird asked. "They're having tryouts for Eagleton's baseball team in two days. I really wanna play. I saw some of their guys playing catch at lunch today. They're good, so I need to be at my best."

"You will not get to go if we do not get those boxes unpacked," Scott announced loudly.

Dave shot him a look that seemed to cause him to shrink even smaller. "We'll get it done, Scott. You're not the boss. I am!"

"At least until Mom gets home," Bird added with the ghost of his standard grin skidding across his face.

"I'm the one in charge for now," Dave said. "And we'll find some time to throw the ball around, Bird. You're good, too. Don't forget it. All these changes going on are just a part of life. By this time next year everything will feel as normal as it ever has."

"Hope so," Bird said, not quite sure if he could fully trust Dave's assurances. "But right now it seems like everything in the whole world is different."