

## CHAPTER ONE



GRANDPA stopped speaking the day he killed my brother, John. His name was John until Grandpa said he looked more like a Bird with the way he kept jumping off things, and the name stuck. Bird's thick, black hair poked out in every direction, just like the head feathers of the blackbirds, Grandpa said, and he bet that one day Bird would fly like one too. Grandpa kept talking like that, and no one paid him much notice until Bird jumped off a cliff, the cliff at the edge of the tallgrass prairie, the cliff that dropped a good couple hundred feet to a dried-up riverbed below. Bird's little blue bath towel was found not far from his body, snagged on a bush, the towel that served as wings. From that day on, Grandpa never spoke another word. Not one.

The day that Bird tried to fly, the grown-ups were out looking for him—all of them except Mom and Granny. That's because that very day, I was born. And no one's ever called me anything except Jewel, though sometimes I wish they had. Mom and Dad always said that I was named Jewel because I'm precious, but sometimes I think it's because my name begins with *J*, just like John's name, and because they miss him and didn't want to give me a normal name like Jenny or Jackie. Because John had a normal name, and now he's dead.

It was my twelfth birthday today, and everyone was supposed to be happy. It was hard to be happy, though, when Grandpa shut himself up in his room for the whole day, like he does every year on my birthday. Mom and Dad made me a cake with vanilla frosting and sprinkles, gave me a present—some socks from the dollar store, but they're cute and all—and the three of us went to the cemetery to visit Bird and Granny. I always watch those movies where kids have big birthday parties with music and party hats and huge presents and even ponies, and I think it would be nice to have a birthday like that. Especially the ponies. Just once. Instead, I've always had to share my special day with the silence behind Grandpa's closed door and the silence at the cemetery and the silence that hangs thick between Mom and Dad's words.



Mom and Dad washed the dishes from my birthday cake and went to bed, but I couldn't go to sleep, just like every year on my birthday, because I kept imagining what Bird was like, what kind of brother he would have been, and what five-year-olds think when they throw themselves off cliffs.

So I did what I often do when I can't sleep: I changed into my jeans and a long-sleeve shirt, put on some bug spray, and crept out of the house and into the star-studded night. There's this huge oak tree just down the road in Mr. McLaren's field, and I often climb that tree as high as I can, and lean my back against its warm, thick trunk. There, I watch the moon arc through the sky and listen to the whirring of the crickets or the rustling of the oak leaves or the hollow calls of the owl.

For a moment, I thought about going to the cliff where my brother flew. But I knew better than to go there at night.

Now, in my small town of Caledonia, Iowa, we have one grocery store with one cashier, named Susie; three churches; our part-time mayor, who works in our town hall, which also serves as the post office; two restaurants that run the same specials, just on different days; and fourteen other businesses. Things here are as stable as the earth, and that's how folks seem to like it. No one's ever told me that going to the cliff should be kept secret, but that's one of the things about adults: The most important rules to keep are the ones

they never tell you and the ones they get the angriest about if you break.

I wouldn't tell them I go to the cliff anyway, because adults don't listen to what kids have to say. Not really. If they did, they would actually look at me when I talk, look good and deep and open-like, ready to hear whatever comes out of my mouth, ready for anything. I don't know any adult who's ever looked at me like that, not even my parents. So the good stuff, the real things that I've seen and experienced, like at the cliff—I keep all that to myself. My family doesn't fit in as it is.

Anyway, tonight I was making my way down County Line Road, which still radiated heat, and my tennis shoes were scuffing against the gravel when suddenly I got the feeling that something was wrong. Different. A shiver zipped across my skin. I stopped and looked at my oak tree. The moon was waxing, growing slowly toward its milky whole self, and the tree was glowing and dark at the same time, its arms spread wide like a priest's toward the sky. As I squinted in the silver light, a pit formed in my stomach, and I realized what it was.

Someone was already in my tree.

"Heya," said a voice. It was a boy's voice. I tensed up all over. There's never anyone outside at this time of night, grown-up or kid. Maybe it was a duppy, those Jamaican ghosts that Dad always worried about. Duppies' powers are



strongest at night, Dad says, and they often live in trees. You can tell a duppy lives there when a tree's leaves blow around like crazy even though there's not a speck of wind. Or if one of its limbs breaks off for no good reason. If something like that happens there's definitely a duppy in that tree, right there. Duppies can also be tricky and just show up. Like, they can be in your tree when there was never a duppy there before.

But the boy's voice carried long and lonely through the night in a way that I didn't think a duppy's voice could, and each leaf on each limb was perfectly still, frozen in the moonlight. On any normal night I might have just played it safe, turned around, and run back home, but it was my birthday, my special day, and I wasn't going to go running away and let a duppy ruin it. So instead I said, "Hey," back, and I stepped over the shoots of corn, crossing the dry, hard dirt of Mr. McLaren's field. The boy was up on the third limb—the same limb I was meaning to sit on—and his shadowed legs straddled the branch like a horse, swinging back and forth, back and forth.

He was in my tree and I felt kind of stupid, like I didn't know what to do.

"What are you doing out here at this time of night?" he asked me. I peered up but couldn't see his face.

I tried to shrug casually. "I climb my tree sometimes, when I can't sleep."

"Is that true?" He said it surprised, but like he didn't really want an answer, so I didn't give him one. "But it's not your tree, now, is it?" he said.

"It's not yours, either."

The limb creaked, like he was peering down at me. I squirmed a little in the moonlight. "Is too my tree. I'm John. This is my uncle's farm, so it's my tree. I can climb it anytime I want."

I'm sure he said some other things, but my brain stopped after he said *I'm John*.

I must have looked as stupid as I felt, because his voice got a little nicer. "You know, not too many other kids live around here in this middle of nowhere. Especially not many who climb trees at night."

And before I knew it, he was asking me to come up and sit with him, and I was shimmying up the rope that I'd tied and then climbing the warm, tough bark of the tree, hand over hand, legs pushing forever up, until I was sitting on the branch below his. John's face was still dark, as I was craning my neck up into the cool shadows.

But I was sitting in a patch of moonlight, and he got a good look at me. "Hey," he said, "what are you, anyway?" The



words were curious, not mean. "You're not from around here."

A little *something* tightened inside me, like it did every time I got this question, but I was used to it. Mostly. "I'm half-Jamaican, a quarter white, and a quarter Mexican," I said.

"Wow," John said. "I didn't know people could turn out like that."

"And I *am* from around here," I said, making sure my voice carried over the crickets. "I was born in the house down the road."

John said, "I'm not trying to insult you or anything. I've just never met someone like you."

I twirled a thick, kinky lock of hair around my finger, then untwirled it. I've learned that it's best to get this conversation out of the way so we can talk about more interesting things. "Well, now you have," I replied. "And my name's Jewel."

He nodded, almost like he already knew that. "Jewel," he said. His voice lingered over the word. "I like that name."

"I don't."

"It's memorable. Like, everyone's going to know they've met a Jewel. But 'John'? Forget it. We're a dime a dozen."

"No, you're not." The words came out too fast, too harsh, too laden with pain I forgot to hide.

John paused in the darkness, on his third limb. "Okay,

maybe a dollar a dozen, then." He spoke carefully now. "But I still think Jewel is nice."

We sat in that tree in the middle of the field under the waxing moon. Suddenly he said, "You know, stars are like jewels. But they don't twinkle like you think. What your eye perceives as twinkling is the light waves refracting through the layers of the atmosphere."

The way he spoke, he sounded like a teacher. A good teacher. Maybe that's why I decided to ask a question, not like in school. "Refracting?" I asked.

"The light bends," he said. "At a lot of different angles, depending on the layers of atmosphere, and that refracting light changes how we perceive the position and size of a star." His voice hung in the space above me. "The only way to see the stars as they truly are is to get above the atmosphere. Into space."

There was no breeze that night, just a thin layer of moist air that hung around us, like the entire earth was listening in.

"I never thought about stars like that."

John laughed, and it was a short, nice laugh. "Just wait until the Perseids show up."

"The what?"

"The Perseids. A huge meteor shower that takes place in August."



I had never seen the Perseids before, or even heard of them, and I said so.

"It's okay," he said. "Most people can't see what's in front of them if they don't know what they're looking for. But once you know what you're looking for, you wonder how you *didn't* see it. Just wait: Once you see the Perseids, you'll see them every year, guaranteed."

"How do you know so much about stars?" I blurted out.

I heard the smile in his voice. "I'm going to be an astronaut when I grow up."

John was so different from the other kids in Caledonia. Most kids around here want to be mechanics or nurses or take over the family business. I almost told him that I was going to be a geologist when I grow up, but I didn't. Instead, I was quiet. If you give up too much of yourself, too fast, then someone can just up and take it away. And a person like me, without too much of my own to start with—well, you need to be careful with what you got.

I don't know how long we sat there, but sitting in that tree felt different this time around. Maybe I was getting too old. Or maybe it was just strange sitting there with someone else.

I climbed down after a while, and he climbed down after me. I saw him for the first time clearly in the moonlight, and it was then that I realized why I couldn't see him all

that well before: His skin was dark, dark as the night sky.

“You’re McLaren’s nephew?” I blurted out. My mouth was too fast for any politeness. Mr. McLaren is as white as white could get.

John smiled, and his teeth shone like tiny rows of moons. “Sure am. I’m adopted. Raised by white people. It’s not as bad as it sounds.”

I wasn’t sure if he was talking about being adopted or being raised by white people, but I nodded as if I understood. He held out his hand, and I took it and shook it, just like the grown-up I was becoming. I was surprised at how firm his grip was, like we were going to conquer the world.

It was the best handshake ever.

But handshake or no handshake, as my shoes crunched against the gravel on my way home, I wondered about how I could meet someone named John on this night. As Dad says, there are no coincidences in life. Which is a fancy way of saying that when things are meant to happen, no matter how mysterious or crazy or impossible, they’re going to happen. And I think he’s right.