



## CHAPTER 1

### A Crow Winked at Me

**T**he bus bumped against the gravel road, punching up a cloud of orange-tan dust. I was the last to get off, as usual. It's pretty common to let the country kids sit and be bored the longest. Todd, the bus driver, sped past the field where Dad planted corn with his red Case tractor. In the west, dark storm clouds collected, revealing the first signs of incoming rain. Dad wouldn't stop working until either the rain came, the seed ran out, or he'd finished planting. It'd be a quiet afternoon at home since I'd be the only one there.

Todd dropped me off and gave me a disinterested wave as he shut the door and drove away. I headed to the house, and the only sound was the gravel crunching under my feet and the song of a few random birds.

I was alone.

*Finally*, alone.

Sixth grade has a way to make you want to hide in your room for a week.

On the ride home, my stomach reminded me that I was starving to death, so my first stop would be to get some food. After only a few steps, I hesitated as I caught sight of the field behind our house.

It was finished, with dark soil turned up from the blades of the planter. Tilling and planting always revealed rocks and other interesting things that nature had buried for years. It was always the best time to search for treasures.

Living near the Mississippi River, one could discover all sorts of Indian artifacts. I'd found a few things over the years—such as a stone scraper and some broken arrowhead tips—but I've never found the prize of a whole arrowhead. My dad has, but not me.

Sometimes I spend hours digging through my dad's treasure chest, which was just an antique wooden cigar box filled with neat junk. My dad has found old coins, strange knickknacks, and rocks with fossils of shells embedded inside. He also discovered a blackened and chipped cannon ball, but it wouldn't fit in his box. Instead, it sits on the bookshelf next to his computer desk, looking more like a pile of dog poop than an artifact. Dad displays it like a prize bowling trophy, but it's uglier and better.

My favorite thing in his collection—and his favorite as well—is a textbook-perfect arrowhead. No broken bits.

Perfect proportion and shape. I can turn it in my palm and stare at it for hours.

My dad has always liked the challenge of finding them. Either that, or sitting on a tractor, staring at corn for hours made him really bored. But for me... it means a whole lot more.

You see, my dad is German and my mom was Cherokee. And apart from my German-blue eyes, I could pass for an extra in one of those old cowboy and Indian movies. My mom died when I was a baby, so I don't remember her at all. Even though my mom had been a rather modern Native American—she'd been a stewardess on an airplane when my dad met her—the arrowhead and all the other Native American artifacts remind me of her.

As I stood there trying to decide if hunger or adventure would win, the rumble of a motor interrupted my thoughts. I turned just as my neighbor's beat-up truck pulled into the farmyard.

Bob stepped out, leaving the motor running and door wide open. A cheesy grin spread across his face. "Hey there, Koda," he said. "Your dad in the field?"

I nodded and pointed. "Yup, just down there."

"Since you're the man here right now," he said with a wink, "I'll ask you. I saw some coyotes, but they ran onto your property. Mind if I go in and get them before they cause more trouble?"

I knew why he killed them, though I wasn't too thrilled about it. When they got too big in numbers, they could be

dangerous. I sighed and nodded. “That’s fine, Bob.”

He grinned and the toothpick in his mouth shifted to one side as he slapped me hard on the shoulder. “Want to come along?”

“No, thanks,” I said, rubbing my shoulder. “Got some chores.”

“Ah, yes. Planting time and all.” He climbed into his pickup, and I noticed two limp coyotes piled in the bed of his truck. “If you see any, give me a holler. Okay?”

“Sure thing,” I lied.

The truck drove off, and my stomach grumbled a reminder. After heading into the house for two Ding Dongs, a package of Pop-Tarts, and an apple with caramel dip for my serving of fruit, I went outside in search of unburied treasures.

Slowly, I scanned the field, kicking up clods of dirt and debris from last year’s crops. I pushed aside several suspicious arrowhead-shapes—which turned out to be plain old rocks. Just when my stomach told me to go back for snack session number two, a flash of silver caught my eye.

I knelt and plucked up a quarter. Rubbing the dirt off, I could make out a faint date. It read 1896. I grinned. It wasn’t an arrowhead, but at least I wouldn’t come back empty handed.

In the cloud-dotted sky, a crow circled, cawing as it soared. I squinted, holding my hand over my eyes to block

out the mid-afternoon sun. It circled, and swooped down, landing no more than five feet from me. On top of the bird's head—where smooth, black feathers were supposed to be—a rooster spray stuck up and about in a haphazard way. And those oddball feathers weren't black. They were several shades of light brown, like the poor thing had flown headfirst into a freshly painted fence.

I snorted a laugh. It looked so stupid. "Hey there," I said. "See any arrowheads from up there?"

It cocked its head.

I flinched when my phone rang out a chorus of "The Lion Sleeps Tonight." It was my dad.

"Hey," I answered.

"Hey, Koda. Where you at?"

"I'm... uh..."

"Find anything good?"

I smiled. Dad knew me well. "Not much. You need any help?"

"Nah. Not today. Looks like that storm is coming in, so I'm finishing up. Don't get too far from home. Coyotes are out."

"Yeah, I know. Bob already stopped by. Not sure why he thinks shooting them all will make a difference. They're not bothering anyone."

"I think he gets good money for the skins."

I snorted. "So does working, instead of killing things."

The crow looked at me again, its head tilted as if listening to my conversation. It even gave me an approving

nod. *Strange little bird.*

“Koda?”

I blinked, realizing that Dad had been talking. “Sorry, what did you say?”

Dad chuckled. “Well, be careful. The coyotes are probably running around with Bob hunting. You also don’t want to accidentally get shot. Okay?”

“Sure, Dad. I’ll get back to the house. See you soon.”

I shoved my phone back into my pocket. The crow still hadn’t moved. It just stood there, staring at me like I had something hanging out of my nose.

I wiped at it, just in case, and stared right back. Then, that bird smiled. My eyes widened. Birds don’t smile. I stared even harder and then it winked.

It didn’t just blink. It was a head-cocked, exaggerated wink, like an animation from a cartoon. My mouth dropped open, and the crow took off, circled once, and flew to another field.

I stood there, dumbfounded, rubbing my eyes. I was just seeing things from staring at the ground too long. Maybe I’d eaten too much junk; although, it had tasted good. Of course, that crow hadn’t winked. It had just been my imagination... or so I thought.



## Chapter 2

### I Get Struck By Lightning... Maybe

**J**ust so you know, the world did not end because a crow winked at me. Matter of fact, school the next day was exactly normal. Which, of course, means it was boring.

Math?

Boring.

Science?

Boring.

In Social Studies, we were studying Abraham Lincoln and other dead president stuff. It might have been interesting if Mr. Scarborough hadn't droned on and on. I *liked* history, and he made it so dull I could curl into a ball and fall asleep.

It wasn't until band when things got weird.

Mr. Cunningham, our band director, isn't the best teacher in the world. He makes band more of a party than anything. Every day in band, people play their instruments

at the same time while he tries to talk; trombone players hook purse straps with the end of their slides and the trumpets terrorize the flutes. Today, a group of idiots attempted three-point paper wad shots into Emily Tweddle's bushy, red hair. She didn't notice and only laughed while talking to her neighbor. As she moved, paper snow fluttered off her head.

I play drums and stand in the back of the band room watching the show unfold. It's usually a three-ring circus... or a zoo. Except Mr. Cunningham doesn't have one ounce of control. If he were a real zookeeper, a tiger would've eaten him a long time ago.

Not only did I have a perfect view of the chaos, I always had a great view of Gracie Weiser in the clarinet section. She wore a purple Hollister t-shirt and her brown hair bounced behind her head in a high ponytail. She looked awesome, as usual. Talking to her friend, Marcy what's-her-name, she didn't seem to notice all the craziness going on around her.

"B-flat concert scale," Mr. Cunningham said. He tapped his stick on the music stand like an angry woodpecker.

Jimmy Hayward lobbed another spit wad.

Mr. Cunningham cleared his throat. "Unless you want to cancel our trip on Saturday?"

The room fell silent. We were going on our first band field trip this weekend to Adventure Acres, a small theme



park in central Iowa. You couldn't compare it to Six Flags or Disneyland or anything, but we'd still have a load of fun.

After his threatening inspiration, we began our warm-up scales. As boring as it was for the other instruments, it put drummers to sleep. All four of us lined up on our snare drums and tapped out a steady rhythm. When we started back down the scale, I heard Carl Archer's big mouth next to me.

"Look," Carl said to Todd. "It's Duh-Koda's girlfriend."

*Takoda*, I thought. But I didn't dare say a thing. Arguing with Carl Archer would only get him going. He was an idiot, and his main purpose in life was to be a pain in the butt, which is why ignoring him always worked best. However, the mention of a girlfriend—and hoping Carl hadn't noticed me looking at Gracie Weiser—made blood rush to my face.

Carl snorted. "A real redskin!"

I whipped my head toward him as I continued the steady cadence. The heat in my face intensified, this time not from embarrassment, but from outright rage.

"What are you talking about?" I hissed as the sounds of my drumbeats rose with my temper.

"Over there," he taunted. "Your girlfriend is waiting for you outside."

He pointed at the rectangular window bordering the ceiling. A black bird sat at the window, staring directly at me, its head cocked as if watching my every move. It was

the bizarre crow! The ridiculous patch of funky brown feathers stuck up on its head. There couldn't be another crow that dumb looking, could there? Had it followed me to school?

I stopped playing and staggered forward to get a better look. Just as Mr. C cut off the band with a flourish, I bumped my snare. Like a strategic domino set-up, mine hit Carl's snare, then his snare hit the next one. One by one, the drums crashed to the floor with the grand finale of the big bass drum rolling off its stand and just missing the trombones.

The whole band turned around to gawk. By the glares of the other drummers, everyone knew who the culprit was. Mr. C cleared his throat and said, "Please stay after class for a few moments, Mr. Schwartz."

I nodded. What else could I do? And as Mr. C told us to pull out the first song we'd be playing at the park on Saturday, I looked back to the window.

The dumb crow was gone.

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I've never thought of myself as paranoid. Strange sometimes? Sure. A loser? Probably so. But after that crow came to visit the band room, I looked over my shoulder the rest of the day. It felt like an old black and white movie, the one where all the birds get possessed by Satan and kill

everyone in town. Somehow, that crow had it in for me. When I wasn't paying attention, it would probably swoop down from a locker and peck out my eyeballs.

But as the school day ended, I still had my eyeballs, and I hadn't seen hide or feather of that crow.

On the way home, the rain fell, and the sky darkened to a murky gloom. Water streamed down the bus windows, drowning out the drone of tired kids. Dad would have the rest of the day off.

Dad had parked the tractor and attached planter by the barn, and a light shone from the windows of the machine shed. After a quick trip to the house for a snack or two, I darted back to the shed, hoping Dad could take my mind off winking and smiling birds.

I opened the door to the orderly mess of the shop. A workbench stretched the length of the wall with tools of all shapes and sizes strewn on top. Hanging above the table, box wrenches and socket wrenches and open-end wrenches hung on nails in order of size, from normal household varieties to others as long as my arm.

One of those old rotary-dial phones hung on the wall next to a saw—not that anyone could hear the phone ring with the saw running. Half-finished projects and parts from previous farm repairs lay here and there, sitting on the concrete floor next to the wood shavings and leaves blown in from outside.

My old tricycle rested in the corner, its handlebars rusted from being in the rain one too many times. On a

shelf above my trike, the antenna to the wireless Internet sat. A bird's nest rested next to it. Dad often joked that the bird wanted the best connection, but I knew Dad used it for the laptop so he could check corn markets and weather when he worked outside.

Dad stood in the middle of the cleanest spot in the shop. A hunk of a log sat upright with most of the bark peeled away. He held a chisel to the surface with a hammer poised above it.

He looked up and flashed a smile. "Hey there, kiddo." Picking up a small block of wood on the table next to him, he tossed it in my direction. "Come to hang out with your old man?"

I caught the block. Dad smiled again and went back to work. Wood carving was something he did to unwind. Dad's wooden creations filled our home: from wooden raccoons to giant corncobs. On the shelves in our house, you could find a few of mine, as well. Wood carving became guy time for us. Neither of us talked much. But just hanging out and carving together, we could share a lot, even without saying any words.

I picked up my carving knife and yanked a glove onto my left hand. As I got to work, my mind wandered to the crow. I pushed the thought aside and wondered how much the quarter I found yesterday might be worth. Probably only twenty-five cents, but hey, a guy can dream big. Then my thoughts drifted to school and to Gracie Weiser, which

made me think about band and the crow again.

“What’cha making there?” Dad asked.

It took a full second to pull myself from my thoughts and to my carving: I’d made a wooden version of that crow.

“You missed a spot,” Dad said, pointing to the sprig of feathers representing the goofy head.

I hacked them off. “Thanks.” I felt better now that it looked like a common bird.

“Good work,” Dad said. Even in the early stages, I could tell Dad’s project was a bobcat or mountain lion, sitting in a regal position.

“How was school?” Dad asked.

I shrugged. “Oh, you know. Same old stuff.”

One side of Dad’s grin came up mischievously. A lock of blond hair hung in front of his whiskered face. “And how’s that girl... Gracie, isn’t it?”

I cringed, wishing I had never told him about her.

“Have you talked to her yet?”

“No,” I answered.

“You know, Son, if you don’t speak to her, she’ll never know you’re alive.”

The memory of her gawking at me after I destroyed the band room flashed in my head. “She knows I’m alive.” *And an idiot.*

“Good. Well, it’s a start.”

We said nothing more, not until the sun set. Dad stood to his full height of six-foot-four and stretched. “Well, I

think my back is done today.” He grinned. “How about we order pizza?”

We left the shop, laughing about nothing important. The rain stopped and the smell of wet grass and soil lingered in the air. I stretched and smiled, relaxing my shoulders. My carved bird turned out to be one of my best efforts yet. Perhaps all that bird stuff had come in handy after all. I shoved the wooden bird into my jacket pocket, already thinking about how I’d paint it. When we nearly got to the house, Dad nudged me.

“Ha! Look, Koda.” He pointed to the edge of the house where a dark shape perched on the gutter. The farm light and what was left of the setting sun illuminated... the crow. “Looks like the bird you carved. Even has that bit on the top you chopped off. You should’ve kept it.”

I froze in my steps. Dad didn’t notice. Guess he figured I wanted to get a better look. He called over his shoulder as he went inside, “I better get two pizzas; otherwise, I won’t get any, with the way you’re eating.”

His words drifted away into a buzzing drone, and I could only focus on the crow. The bird motioned with its head, a “come here” gesture. Moving in slow motion, I listened to its call.

As soon as I got close enough, it launched off the roof and landed on the fence post. I reached toward it, and it flew to the roof of the machine shop. I followed it there too.

“You coming inside?” I heard my dad call from the door.

“Just a minute,” I croaked out through my dry throat.

“You’ve got twenty. I’ll be back with the pizzas then. If you don’t come fast enough, I can’t guarantee you’ll get any,” he teased.

“Twenty minutes,” I answered. “Got it.”

When I reached the shop, the crow took off again, this time toward the cornfield, the same one where I’d found the coin. Still within sight of the house, the crow circled over a spot in the field. It landed gracefully, cocking its head.

I hesitated. The field resembled muddy soup. I stepped in and my foot slid in the muck. I took another, knowing my shoes were already a mess. It would take some effort to get out to where the bird wanted me to go, especially now that the sun dimmed.

I reached the spot where the crow sat but decided I shouldn’t get too close. The bird glanced at the ground and back up, like a playful dog motioning to a dropped ball. I stepped closer and saw a white stone sticking out of the dirt. The crow hopped back further. I squatted next to the rock.

An arrowhead!

I grabbed it, excitement pumping through me. And then... the next thing I remember is lying on my back, sunk ear deep into the mud. I’m not sure how long. I’m guessing for about twenty minutes because Dad revived me

by ringing the old-time farm bell.

Lightning flashed in a distant county behind some dark clouds.

“Koda!” Dad yelled, concern in his voice.

I slowly sat up, my limbs making sucking sounds as I pulled them free. When I put my hand to my muck-coated head, I noticed the arrowhead still clutched in my palm.

It was real.

I had found an arrowhead!

But what happened? The sky flashed again. The only thing I could fathom was getting struck by lightning. But even that made little sense. I should be crispy-fried.

“Koda!” He stood by the bell pole.

I waved. “Over here.”

The silhouette of his shoulders relaxed. “Blast it, boy. Didn’t you hear me calling?”

“I think I hit my head.”

Dad came, his feet sucking in the mud as he closed the distance. When he saw me, his eyebrows rose in both surprise and amusement. “Goodness sake, Koda.” He poked at my head, and I did have a nice lump. I must’ve bumped my head when I hit the ground.

“Ouch!”

“Come on. Let’s get you inside.”





## Chapter 3

### I Turn a Pencil into a Snake

Once I got over the shock of lightning striking me—or whatever happened—I was on a treasure hunter's high. The arrowhead was bigger and better than my dad's. After I showed it to him, he forgot to be mad about me not coming when he called. I even forgave that dumb crow for stalking me. Not sure how it knew I was searching for arrowheads, but it led me straight to the thing. When I went to bed, I put it on my nightstand and stared at it as I fell asleep.

When I woke the next morning, I felt a little odd. Not sick, exactly. Just different.

My first period of the day was math, which is cruel if you ask me. I mean, how can teachers expect kids to think that early, especially when school starts at 8:07?

My math teacher, Ms. Blossom, was about as far from her name as you could get. Instead of smelling like flowers,

she always smelled like she'd slurped down a whole pot of garlic-flavored coffee. And as far as looking like a blossom? Yeah, well... She had no bright-colored clothes or smooth petal-like skin. She reminded me of a Venus flytrap, where instead of flies she'd gobble up students for lunch.

The tardy bell rang as Carl Archer squeezed into his seat. Gracie Weiser sat in front of Carl arranging her brown hair into a ponytail. She swished the tail once and her eyes met mine. She smiled.

I jerked my head down and studied some initials carved on my desk. It had probably been there since my dad was in school. My straight, black hair hung in my face. It was longish. Partially because I was too lazy to get it cut, partially because it made me feel closer to my Native American roots, and mostly because it came in handy when I wanted to hide my face.

“Koda?”

I peeked through my hair. Gracie still looked at me, a shy smile on her face. I pushed my hair behind my ear. “Yeah?”

“What happened yesterday?”

The arrowhead flashed in my mind. *How'd she know?*

“In band,” she said. “What did Mr. C make you do? Did you get into trouble?”

“Oh. Um, not really. He had me clean up.”

She stared at me like she wanted to ask me more. I didn't want to explain about how much of a klutz I'd been.

Knocking down a whole drum section wouldn't be on the list of Top Ten Ways To Impress a Girl.

"He's a moron, that's what happened," Carl answered instead.

I cringed. Like I needed Carl's help to look like an idiot. I did a good job of it on my own.

"Who's the moron?" Gracie said, giving Carl a pretty impressive glare.

My mouth opened. *Did she just defend me?*

Luckily, Ms. Blossom stepped in front of the room before things could get even more awkward.

"Please put away your books," Ms. Blossom said. "Take out your pencils for a pop quiz."

A chorus of groans and complaints erupted from the room. Ms. Blossom ignored us as she slapped papers face down on each person's desk.

She grinned, as if she couldn't wait to give her first big fat F. I wasn't too worried. I got good grades in math. But even doing well in a subject didn't guarantee a good grade when the word *pop* was involved.

Once everyone had their papers, she stalked to the front of the room.

"You have ten minutes and ten minutes only. No talking. No getting out of your seats. If you get up for any reason, you get an F. If I see you cheating or even looking like you might cheat, you get an F. If you look at someone else's paper, you get an F."

She turned to her desk and picked up one of those old

kitchen timers. Not the kind where you push buttons, the ones you crank and listen to the annoying ticking the entire time.

“Ready...”

And as she said the word *go* Carl flicked my pencil off my desk. It clattered to the floor, rolled in a circle, and stopped cold.

I blinked, stunned. With a deep breath, I reached for my pencil, but it was too far away.

I stretched out my foot... Too far.

I pushed my chair out and stood.

“No getting out of your seat, Mr. Schwartz,” Ms. Blossom warned.

Slumping back into my desk, the timer ticked away, reminding me of my impending doom. I only brought one pencil—which was stupid. I gave a pleading glance at Gracie. Maybe she had an extra I could borrow. Before I could ask her, Ms. Blossom cleared her throat.

“Eyes on your own paper.”

Carl smirked at me in triumph. *Yup. I'm doomed.*

The timer kept ticking. Nine minutes... Eight minutes... Seven. Even if I knew long division, I couldn't take the test without something to write with. I pushed the panic aside and made one more go at my pencil. Instead of reaching with my foot, I leaned over my chair, stretching through the bars of my desk.

“Come on,” I whispered.

At first, my pencil twitched like a breeze had jostled it. Then it wiggled, jolted, and slinked across the floor.

I yanked my hand back and gasped. Blinking hard, I tried to clear the hallucination. It didn't go away.

The girl in front of me screamed and jumped on her chair. The snake reared back and silently hissed. A tongue resembling a pencil lead flicked from its eraser-shaped mouth. Its eyes, which looked like they'd been drawn on, glared at her before it quickly slithered away.

Then my pencil—er, I mean the snake—must've sensed danger, because it made a dash for the door.

Student after student jumped up and chairs screeched across the floor.

The most bloodcurdling scream of all rang out, like someone got stabbed with a heated campfire tong. Ms. Blossom jumped on her desk and yelled, "Get it out! Get it out! GET IT OUT!!"

And after that, several teachers ran into our room.

I'm not sure where my pencil had gone. The room hummed with craziness. The other teachers told Ms. Blossom everything would be fine. She didn't believe them, though. She marched out of the room, her pointed nose stuck high in the air.

In quick order, our pop quiz turned into a study hall with the stringy-haired janitor as our substitute teacher. Needless to say, any sort of organization was tossed out the window. Quizzes were fashioned into paper airplanes. And me? Well, I didn't do much. I knew what really happened.

My pencil had turned into a snake, right before my eyes.

Now, one might think one pencil-to-snake incident would be enough crazy. I'm afraid to tell you, my friend, crazy just warmed up. An abundance of snakes slinked around school that day—oddly, the same amount as the number of pencils I tried to take out of my locker, plus two more roughly the size of drumsticks.

Don't get me wrong. I like snakes. Every time I see one at the farm—like a bull snake or a garter snake—I catch it and let it go. But when I can't do my homework because my pencil slithers out of my hand, it might lower my grade. And when I can't even play my drums because my sticks go all limp and squirmy... Well, you can see it posed quite a problem.

Screams and shrieks sounded throughout the day until finally, the principal announced over the loudspeakers that we'd be closing early due to an "infestation problem". I knew the infestation was only me: Koda Schwartz... aka, snake charmer.

The ride home was uneventful—at first. A kid dropped his pencil on the bus and asked me to pick it up for him. I'd learned my lesson, so I ignored him and looked out the window. I wouldn't touch another pencil, so I shoved my hands deep into my jacket pockets and closed my hand around something hard.

The object moved. I yanked it out and, to my astonishment, a tan colored bird sat in my open palm. It

cocked its head and took off, zooming and terrorizing everyone on the bus.

Finally, Todd, the bus driver, pulled over. He uttered all sorts of things, which kids get in trouble for saying, as he shooed the bird out the door. I watched it fly away and realized that my life had changed into something very weird. What happened? *How* was it happening? That wasn't just any bird; I'd carved it from wood the day before.