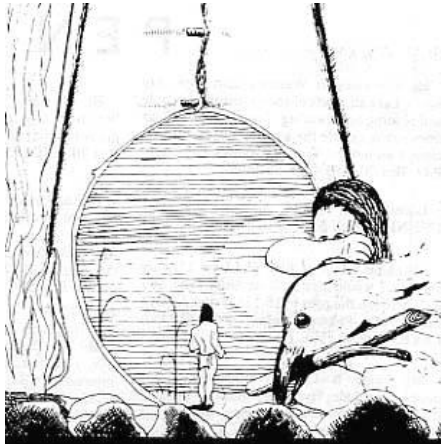


At times
we feel small, helpless,
at a loss for our direction and purpose
then *something* unexpected happens.
Perhaps that *something* even appears insignificant
like only a word, an idea, a single thought,
maybe a fleeting event.
But if we're paying attention—
what *seems* insignificant
might
create a change to our entire destiny...



PART ONE - *The Crow Child*

PROLOGUE...A storm shot down from the mountains in a sudden gust right after breakfast – at 7:13 AM exactly the same time that Margaret O'Day Clearwater's water broke sending her into immediate labor, three weeks early...

Already living at the house of her husband Glen's, Great Aunt Lucille, the two women began preparations for the baby's delivery.

Morning became midday then midday became late afternoon then with late afternoon the storm became stronger. A fierce wind flung pelting rain sideways making roads treacherous.

Then at 4:13 PM distant thunder abruptly came closer and louder and sent a shaft of lightening into a lone tree – catching it on fire at exactly the same moment Elijah O'Day Clearwater was born...

CHAPTER...1

“Have you decided what you want for your birthday, Elijah?”

Grandpa Clearwater stirred his grandson’s herb tea slowly with a fresh cinnamon stick. The cloves and ginger broth was still too hot to drink.

“In thirteen days you’ll turn thirteen on April thirteenth that makes your age *on* your birth date, an exceptionally special birthday.”

Tree sap sizzled and spit as a fire crackled in the cast iron wood stove.

The warm kitchen wrapped Elijah in aromas of burning pine, his grandfather’s strong coffee and steaming spices. He looked up from his bowl of fresh raspberries mixed with applesauce. “I want a new bow, a bigger bow!”

Rock Clearwater ambled over to the table with his coffee mug and Elijah’s spiced tea. The man’s brown eyes almost disappeared when he smiled behind wrinkled brown skin tanned by years in the sun and his Sarsi Tsuu T’ina heritage. “I see. Well then eat up.”

“And finish this too.” He pushed Elijah’s mug across the wide wood table. “If you want a bigger bow you’re going to need more muscle, not those spindly birch branches you have now.”

Elijah giggled and caught juice that dribbled from the corner of his lips as he swallowed. “Why do you always make me laugh when my mouth is full?”

His grandfather pretended to be serious. “It’s all part of your archery training—to develop concentration.”

“G-r-a-n-d-p-a?” But Elijah’s laugh started painful coughing spasms.

Grandpa Clearwater reacted quickly. Pushing Elijah’s head down he thumped his grandson’s back with his cupped palm to help clear his grandson’s lungs then held the nebulizer mask up to Elijah’s nose and mouth.

After two full minutes Rock Clearwater eased his grandson to sit upright again on his kitchen chair then pulled a second chair closer so he could sit next to Elijah. “Well I guess now we don’t need to use your chest-clapper before you go to bed tonight.”

With his head resting on his grandfather’s chest it was several more minutes before Elijah’s pulse returned to normal and he could take deeper breaths again.

Elijah closed his eyes focusing his mind on the rising and falling of his grandfather’s breathing. He could hear the muffled beat of his grandfather’s heart and it calmed him.

Later propped up by two pillows in his loft room bed, Elijah’s face was slightly flushed. He was tired, but smiled for his grandfather. “I have another birthday *want* that’s really more of a *don’t-want*. I really, really, really don’t want cystic fibrosis anymore, Grandpa.”

His grandfather frowned. “I know son, I know me neither. Have a good sleep.”

Then Elijah drifted, gliding to a faraway place and time...

...Four members of the clan hid beneath a rock ledge in the river canyon for two sunsets and three sunrises.

Prince Dade stirred the fire embers looking up the length of the steep, rocky slope across from his watch point. Reef and Tann still hadn’t returned from their early morning scouting. It was late afternoon and there was less than three hours of daylight left. Dade worried.

As he checked over his shoulder toward the sandstone wall his mate Ona cradled their infant daughter as she slept. She had been diligent about keeping their child quiet so the sound of the tiny piercing voice would not give away the location of this camp.

Their oxen remained staked deep into the forest where the trees and underbrush could muffle their sounds if they made any. But mostly they had grazed quietly which was fortunate.

If his cousin Torr was able to discover more than two of their previous resting places then he could guess their direction. Following the river was a risk. Torr could check along its banks for Dade’s men with his lieutenants Baza and Kauji, as they would need water too.

A faint light flickered from a hand-held rock of mica a mile down the river on the opposite side of the bank. Dade stood and moved closer to the ledge, but he could tell from the signal it was Tann. Tann was returning with Reef.

Relieved Dade added more broken branches to the dwindling fire, ensuring that any thin smoke plum was under the rock overhang.

When Prince Dade's trusted guards reached the wide sheltered ledge Reef reported first. "Torr stopped to make a night camp. Then I found him again as he crossed through the forest to reach water."

"I'm sure Torr does not suspect our exact destination yet. When I saw him at first light, he was with these fighters," Reef held up both hands with all fingers spread, "but not Kauji. Much later at the river he was with only Baza and these fighters." The guard held up just one hand with all of his fingers spread.

"Torr and those with him are one sunset and one sunrise from us in that direction." Reef pointed southwest.

"The others led by Kauji have remained in the open plains attempting to track us in that direction." Tann extended his arm straight east. "They have separated to cover more area. When I ceased watching them they were moving a greater distance from Torr and by first new light will be another sunrise away and of no threat. We are now of the same number as Torr's smaller tracking party."

"We stopped so Ona could deliver." The prince reminded his guards. "She is good, but still recovering. She is unable to power a sword and because of her milk should not use her bow for several more sunrises."

Scooping damp soil he had gathered to smother the small fire Prince Dade shared his plan. One side of his dark blonde hair, blown by the wind fell across his chiseled cheekbones with strands stuck in his beard.

"Quickly eat the fish Ona's mother cooked then we clear this camp of any sign we were here. If we use Torr's camp time to continue, we can also use the dark as cover until the moon is high to get closer toward the land of Erdini."

Grandpa Clearwater reached the top step on the wide spiral staircase, to the loft where Elijah slept. He had to stoop slightly until he reached the peak of the pitched roof where he could stand up straight.

Elijah's king-sized bed was set on a thick hooped rug on the floor. Open box style shelves stacked from the floor to a height of four feet were set just below the start of the sloped roof.

They held Elijah's clothes and toys. Toys, especially his bins of Lego were often mixed with a pair of socks or t-shirts, or a sweater.

Watching his grandson sleep, he remembered the first few nights when Elijah first came to live with him and his late wife. They had slept with three year-old Elijah between them after their son Glen and daughter-in-law Margaret were killed in a winter storm car accident.

Even two years later when he was five Elijah's grandmother still worried that he might choke if he coughed at night. So she had insisted they keep the larger bed for their grandson which allowed them to take turns sleeping beside him.

The head of the growing youth with the unruly mop-top of dark curly hair turned on the pillow. With a deep sigh, Elijah opened his hazel eyes. He saw his grandfather, but said nothing at first only looking beyond Grandpa Clearwater with a vacant stare for several seconds.

"I was just about to wake you. Do you want me to thump your back now or would you rather strap on the chest-clapper?"

Elijah sat up and stretched. "The clapper, but after we eat. I'm starving, and I hav'ta pee. Is it snowing?"

"Not yet, but it will be in another two hours by the time your school bus arrives." Rock Clearwater returned to the top of the staircase and started back down. "When you go to the outhouse wear your rubber boots and not my house slippers," his head was just above the floor, "or I'll make you go barefoot." He winked. "Hurry, our oatmeal is ready."

Elijah settled into a chair waiting for his morning oatmeal. "I had the weirdest dream last night or maybe it was this morning. I mean it was weird but not. It made sense kinda like I was watching a movie."

Grandpa Clearwater filled two bowls with oatmeal. "I see. That happens sometimes."

The fire burned quieter in their kitchen stove that morning. Elijah noticed there was less bark on the split logs in the fire box.

"Was there a bow in your dream?" He handed Elijah a small pitcher of maple syrup.

"Mmm," Elijah swallowed a bite of his pear. "Not really, there was this guy who seemed to be a leader of some kind and he talked about a bow. Oh, and a sword! And the guy's wife, least I think she was his wife knew how to fight with a sword and use a bow too!"

Grandpa stirred maple syrup into his hot oatmeal. "Your dad taught your mom how to shoot a bow. She had never touched a bow before she moved to Alberta from Ireland and she got pretty good too and so was your grandmother."

Elijah stopped blowing on his oatmeal filled soup spoon. “Why didn’t I know that?”

“Well, you were three when your parents died and you were four when your grandmother had her first heart attack. Your Uncle River didn’t start archery lessons with you and your cousins for two years after that. You and Jayson were six, James was eight and Joseph was seven. Sarah was only four and Jorge and Spring were still in diapers then.”

The wall clock chimed half-past the hour.

“You better finish and we can do ten minutes with the clapper before you get dressed, unless you plan to wear your frog pajamas to school.”

Half a mile from the end of Elijah Clearwater’s driveway, the bright yellow Canmore County school bus rounded a wide bend when he spotted the first snow flakes. He was still trying to catch the wide, late spring snowflakes on his tongue when the bus stopped and the driver, Mrs. Deerling opened the front side door.

He threw his backpack on the bus floor ahead of him then climbed the two deep steps. He quickly scanned down the first few rows of occupied and unoccupied seats before deciding to sit beside Sasha Deerling who always sat right behind her mother, this route’s bus driver.

Sasha was in grade four with his cousin Spring Blackelk. Sasha had blonde curly hair, a sweet smile and dark brown eyes with the thickest glasses he’d ever seen anyone wear except his late grandmother.

That morning Elijah wasn’t in the mood to lug his backpack any distance down the center aisle of the bus *and* hoped to avoid his least favorite kid the big-*wart* Larry Swallowtail.

“Hey stick-boy!” Larry hollered from six rows behind him.

Usually the older kid was distracted playing a video game, but obviously not this morning. “Catch a lot of snow with that big mouth of yours?”

Elijah knew from their turbulent history together that if he didn’t acknowledge the annoying lump, the tormenting just got worse for several days. He turned in the direction of Larry’s voice and waved with a thin lip smile.

Larry sat by the window sharing a bus seat with Elijah’s older cousin James Blackelk. His other cousins Joseph and Jayson sat in the seat behind them. He didn’t see Sarah, Jorge or Spring.

When Larry was around Elijah thought his two oldest cousins acted like brainless zombies. Larry had been held-back two school grades. He’d been partially raised by two foster families, his sometimes absent mother, and his sometimes sober father.

In January Larry's grandmother had taken him and his parents into her house on her turkey farm north and west of the Sarsi Reservation. Soon after that Elijah began to wish Larry was still in the Calgary school system or better still at the other end of the country somewhere on the east coast of New Brunswick.

