

CHAPTER ONE

Sent Away

I was only six years old and I was worried. I sat behind our hogan, leaning against its familiar walls and looking up toward the mesa. I hoped I would see an eagle, for that would be a good sign. I also hoped I would not hear anyone call my name, for that would be a sign of something else entirely. But the eagle did not appear. Instead, my mother's voice, not much louder than a whisper, broke the silence.

"Kii Yázhí, come. Your uncle is in the wagon."

The moment I dreaded had arrived. I stood and looked toward the hills. I could run up there and hide. But I did not do so, for I had always obeyed my mother—whose love for me was as certain as the firmness of the sacred earth beneath my moccasins. However, I did drag my feet as I came out from behind our hogan to see what I knew I would see. There stood my tall, beautiful mother. Her thick black hair was tied up into a bun. She was dressed in her finest clothing—a new, silky blue blouse and a blue pleated skirt decorated with bands of gold ribbons. On her feet were soft calf-high moccasins, and she wore all her silver and turquoise jewelry. Her squash-blossom necklace, her bracelets, her concha belt, her earrings—I knew she had adorned herself with all of these things for me. She wanted me to have this image

of her to keep in my mind, to be with me when I was far from home.

However, the thing I saw most clearly was what she held in her arms. It was a small bundle of my clothes tied in a blanket. My heart sank. I really was going to be sent away.

My mother motioned toward the door of our hogan and I went inside. My great-grandfather was waiting for me on his bed. He was too weak to walk and was so old that he had shrunk in size. He had never been a big man, but now he was almost as small as me. Great-grandfather took my hand in both of his.

"Be strong, Kii Yázhí," he rasped, his voice as creaky as an old saddle. I stood up on my toes so that I could put my arms around his neck and then pressed my cheek against his leathery face. "Kii Yázhí," he said again, patting my back. "Our dear little boy."

I had always been small for my age. My father used to tease me about it, saying that when I was born he made my cradleboard out of the handle of a wooden spoon. My baby name was Awéé Yázhí. Little Baby. Little I was and little I stayed. I went from being Awéé Yázhí, Little Baby, to Kii Yázhí, Little Boy.

"You are small," my grandfather said, as if he could hear what I was thinking. "But your heart is large. You will do your best."

I nodded.

When I stepped outside, my mother bent down and embraced me much harder than my grandfather had hugged me. Then she stepped back to stand by the door of our hogan.

"Travel safely, my son," Mother said. Her voice was so sad.

My father came up to me and put his broad, calloused hands on my shoulders. He, too, was wearing his best clothing and jewelry. Though he said nothing, I think Father was even sadder than my mother, so sad that words failed him. He was shorter than her, but he was very strong and always stood so straight that he seemed tall as a lodgepole pine to me. His eyes were moist as he lifted me up to the wagon seat and then nodded.

My uncle clucked to the horses and shook the reins. The wagon lurched forward. As I grabbed the wooden backboard to steady myself, I felt a splinter go into my finger from the rough wood, but I ignored the pain. Instead I pulled myself around to turn backward and wave to my parents. I kept waving even after we went around the sagebrush-covered hill and I could no longer see them waving back at me, my father with his back straight and his hand held high, my mother with one hand pressed to her lips while the other floated as gracefully as a butterfly. I did not know it, but it would be quite some time before I saw my home again.

The wheels of the wagon rattled over the ruts in the road. I waved and waved and kept waving. Finally my uncle gently touched me on the wrist. My uncle was the only one in our family who had ever been to the white man's school. His words had helped convince his sister, my mother, to send me to that faraway place. Now he was taking me there, to Gallup, where the mission school was located.

"Kii Yázhí," he said, "look ahead."

I turned to look up at my uncle's kind face. His features were sharp, as hard and craggy as the rocks, but his eyes were friendly and the little mustache he wore softened his mouth. I was frightened by the thought of being away from home for the first time in my life, but I was also trying to find courage. My uncle seemed to know that.

"Little Boy," he said, "Sister's first son, listen to me. You are not going to school for yourself. You are doing this for your family. To learn the ways of the *bilagáanaa*, the white people, is a good thing. Our Navajo language is sacred and beautiful. Yet all the laws of the United States, those laws that we now have to live by, they are in English."

I nodded, trying to understand. It was not easy. Back then, school was such a new thing for our people. My parents and their parents before them had not gone to school to be taught by strangers. They had learned all they knew from their own relatives and from wise elders who knew many things, people who lived with us. People just like us.

My uncle sat quietly for a time, stroking his mustache with the little finger of his right hand. The wagon rattled along, the horses' hooves clopped against the stones in the road. I waited, knowing that my uncle had not yet finished talking. When he stroked his mustache like that, it meant he was thinking and choosing his words with care. It was important not to rush when there was something worthwhile to say.

Then he sighed. "Ah," he said, "your great-grandfather

was your age when the Americans, led by Red Shirt, Kit Carson, made their final war against the Navajos. They wished either to kill us all or remove every Indian from this land. They did this because they did not know us. They did not really understand about the Mexicans."

My uncle turned toward me to see if I understood his words. I politely looked down at my feet and nodded. I knew about the Mexicans. For many years, the Mexicans raided our camps and stole away our people. We were sold as slaves. So our warriors fought back. They raided the villages where our people were held as slaves, rescuing them and taking away livestock from those who attacked us.

"When the Americans came," my uncle continued, "our people tried to be friends with them. But they did not listen to us. They listened to the Mexicans, who could speak their language and said that we were bad people. Instead of helping to free us from slavery, the Americans ordered all the Navajos to stop raiding the slave traders. Some of our bands signed papers and kept the promise not to raid. But each Navajo band had its own headmen. Not all of them signed such papers. So, when all of our people did not stop raiding, the Americans made war on all of the Navajos. They burned our crops, killed our livestock, and cut down our peach trees. They drove our people into exile. They sent us on the Long Walk."

Again my uncle paused to stroke his mustache and again I nodded. I had heard stories about the Long Walk from my great-grandfather. The whole Navajo tribe was

forced to walk hundreds of miles to a strange and faraway place the white men called Fort Sumner. Hundreds of our people died along the way and even more died there. The earth was salty and dry. Our corn crops failed year after year. Sometimes late winter storms swept in and men froze while they were trying to work the fields. Our people began to call that place *Hwééldi*, the place where only the wind could live. Our people had no houses, but lived in pits dug into the earth. Indians from other tribes attacked us. We were kept there as prisoners for four winters. Even though I was a little boy, I knew this history as well as my own name.

"Kii Yázhí," my uncle said, his voice slow and serious as he spoke. "It was hard for our people to be so far away from home, but they did not give up. Our people never forgot our homeland between the four sacred mountains. Our people prayed. They did a special ceremony. Then the minds of the white men changed. Our people agreed never again to fight against the United States and they were allowed to go back home. But even though the white men allowed us to come home, we now had to live under their laws. We had to learn their ways. That is why some of us must go to their schools. We must be able to speak to them, tell them who we really are, reassure them that we will always be friends of the United States. That is why you must go to school: not for yourself, but for your family, for our people, for our sacred land."

As my uncle spoke, I saw my great-grandfather's face in my mind. There had been tears of love and pity in his eyes as I left our hogan. I knew now that he had been

remembering what it was like when he had been forced to go far away from home. He had been praying life would not be as hard for me at school as it had been for him at Hwééldi.

My uncle dropped his hand onto my shoulder. "Can you do this?" he asked me.

"Yes, Uncle," I said. "I will try hard to learn for our people and our land."

We had reached the hill that marked the edge of our grazing lands. I had never gone beyond that hill before. As my uncle clucked again to the horses, I noticed the pain in my finger and saw the splinter still lodged in it. I carefully worked it free. The tip of that thin needle of wood was red with my blood. Before we went over the hill, I dropped it onto the brown earth. Although I had to go away, I could still leave a little of myself behind.