



A Novel About
the Navajo Marines of World War Two

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.

UNBREAKABLE.

The United States is at war, and sixteen-year-old Ned Begay wants to join the cause—especially when he hears that Navajos are being specifically recruited by the Marine Corps. So he claims he's old enough to enlist, breezes his way through boot camp, and suddenly finds himself involved in a top-secret task, one that's exclusively performed by Navajos. He has become a code talker. Now Ned must brave some of the heaviest fighting of the war, and with his native Navajo language as code, send crucial messages back and forth to aid in the conflict against Japan. His experiences in the Pacific—from Guadalcanal to Iwo Jima and beyond—will leave him forever changed.

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Cover design by Jasmin Rubero

ISBN 0-14-240596-5



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