

Chapter 1

Storm

Ned Yazhi lifted the blanket that covered the door of his hogan. He looked out. The land was cool and gray in the early morning, but beyond the sandy valley, over the red-rock mesas, the sun peeked.

As Ned watched, the light from the rising sun made the red rocks glow. It made the shadows run down the cliffs and turned the sandy valley from gray to tan and green.

Now the land was beginning to wake up. Birds in the junipers and the sage chattered and sang little songs as they hunted seeds and bugs. The sheep stirred in the brush corral. They wanted out. Goats baaed and butted against the poles of the corral. They wanted out, too.

Ned sat down on the ground against the hogan and tied his heavy shoes. He put on his big straw hat. Today he must take the sheep farther up the canyon to find grass. The sheep had eaten all the grass near the hogan long ago.

As Ned stood up, his mother came out of the hogan. The morning sun touched her hair and made it glossy like the back of a raven. It glinted on the row of silver coins on her blouse and rippled on the red velveteen. His mother was beautiful like the sand paintings his father made. Ned liked to look at her. Now she smiled down at him.

“Where will you take the sheep today?” she asked.

“Up the canyon,” said Ned. “Far up the canyon. Yesterday I climbed a high rock while the sheep ate. I could see green farther up the canyon. Perhaps there is more grass.”

His mother stepped back inside the hogan. Ned could hear her singing as she made the morning fire and prepared the dough for bread. Soon he could hear the bread frying and smell the coffee boiling. He got a little water from the water barrel to wash his hands and face. Then he went inside the hogan to eat the morning meal. His father finished his morning prayer and

NED OF THE NAVAJOS

the sprinkling of the sacred pollen. Then he also came inside to eat.

Ned finished the meal. He took an extra piece of fried bread and wrapped it in a piece of paper he had found one day near the trading post. He would eat it when the sun was overhead, for he would be too far from the hogan to return for the midday meal.

He went outdoors to the corral and unfastened the gate sticks. Before he could pull them out of the way the frisky goats had pushed through. They wanted out! They did not like to be shut in a corral all night. They pranced around the hogan. They dashed through the brush shelter where his mother had her loom. They would have taken a bite of the half-woven rug if his mother had not shooed them away with a juniper switch. The sheep crowded out of the corral, but they did not race around the way the goats did.

The two dogs nipped at the heels of the goats to start them up the canyon. Ned's father came outside the hogan and watched as Ned started after the sheep and goats. Ned waved his hat and hurried on. The sheep were running now, for they were thirsty after a night in the corral. He would take them to the watering trough near the trading post.

The sheep and goats raced in the direction of the watering trough. Ned had to run to keep up with them. When he saw that they were headed for the trough, he quit trying to keep up anymore. The dogs would keep them together. He could take his time. By the time he reached the trough the sheep were beginning to push the greedy goats out of the way. Ned hung back when he saw a horse and rider nearby, watching. At first glance he thought it was either one of his uncles or someone from a hogan in the valley. Then he saw that the rider was a white man. Probably it was someone visiting the trader. Often people visited the trader. They drove shiny cars and wore bright-colored clothes. They bought rugs and silver and turquoise ornaments. They took pictures with little boxes.

NED OF THE NAVAJOS

When Ned thought of the pictures he quickly pulled his hat down over his face so that he could just peek out from under it. He did not want this man to take a picture of him!

But the man did not seem to have any small box. He just sat still on the horse and watched the sheep and goats - and Ned. Finally Ned pushed the hat up a little farther on his face. The man smiled at him and spoke. Ned could not understand what the man said, for he could not talk the white man's talk. He did understand the smile, though. Shyly he smiled back.

The sheep and goats were milling around. They had had enough water. Now they wanted grass. Ned called the dogs, and together they tried to urge the sheep up the trail through the canyon. As usual, the sheep did not want to go where Ned wanted them to go, but finally the goats got the idea. They trotted up the trail, butting at each other. The sheep followed. Ned raced after them.

As the trail got steeper, the goats slowed to a walk. The sheep kept straying off the trail, and Ned had to chase them. They went slowly through the narrow entrance to the canyon, where the steep rock walls were so high on either side that Ned had to tip his head back to see the smooth brownish tops. After that the canyon widened and was not so steep. The goats nibbled at any bushes or plants they passed, as they had done each time they had come this way. Sheep nibbled, too, but not at just anything.

Ned hurried them on. He wanted to get far up the canyon before the sand became scorching hot. Ned stayed some distance away from an old, deserted hogan they had to pass. Someone had died there; the doorway was closed and a hole was broken in the north side of the hogan. No one would ever live in it again. Ned stayed as far as possible from it. Off to the other side of the canyon he could see a thin line of smoke rising from among the junipers. His cousins lived in a hogan there.

The sun was already high when Ned reached the part of the canyon he was headed for. The grass was not thick here, but

NED OF THE NAVAJOS

there was more of it than where he had been before. The sheep and goats scattered to eat their fill.

Ned sat in the shade for a while and watched the flock. Then, remembering that he was still hungry, he unwrapped the bread and ate it quickly. A little more would have tasted good, but he almost always felt that way when he had finished his meal. He spread out the paper with which he had wrapped the food. It had small black marks on it. They did not seem to be pictures like his father's sand paintings. There was no beauty in them.

He shrugged. More of the queer ways of the white man. He folded the paper carefully and put it in the pocket of his jeans. He might want it again for wrapping food.

The sheep were still eating close by. The goats were farther away, but that did not matter. Ned picked up a few small stones and threw them at a wind-worn hollow in the rocky cliff. The dogs raised their heads at first when they heard the plink of the rocks hitting the cliff. But soon they slept in spite of the little sounds.

As Ned reached for another handful of stones, he spied an arrowhead. He picked it up and rubbed it clean with his hands. What long-ago people had lost an arrowhead here? Or was it an arrowhead of his own Navajo people? He put it into his pocket. Perhaps he would ask his father about it.

It was midday now. The shadows were short. The air was hot, even hotter than usual. One by one the sheep lay down to rest under junipers and in the shade of rocks. Most of the goats did, also. But Old Whiskers, the ancient one, stood on a rock shaking his horns and pawing with his sharp hooves. Ned tossed a stone in his direction. Old Whiskers pawed the rock more loudly and lowered his head.

“Come down, Old Whiskers,” coaxed Ned. “Sleep like the others. The way home tonight is long.”

Old Whiskers only shook his head the harder. He was not tired. Ned knew that Old Whiskers would not get tired easily. Not that goat! He had already lived two goat lifetimes. Ned's

NED OF THE NAVAJOS

mother said that Old Whiskers was too tough to make good stew.

Ned watched the clouds piling higher and higher over the distant mesas. Now he could hear the thunder - the Holy People were talking somewhere over Navajo Mountain. He wondered what they were saying. For many days now the Holy People had talked above the faraway mesas and mountains. Today it looked as if the clouds might come closer.

Soon the clouds were overhead. They were hiding the sun from the earth. All the time the thunder rolled and the lightning flashed from cloud to cloud.

The sheep were still resting, but they were no longer quiet. The dogs, too, were quivering. Old Whiskers was still pawing the rock.

A shaft of lightning struck the top of the nearest mesa. The crash echoed through the canyon. The sheep and goats jumped to their feet, racing in circles to get away from the unknown terror. Sudden wind tore through the canyon, bending juniper and sage, picking up sand and flinging it at the frightened sheep. There was another crash as lightning struck a nearby mesa; then the rain began. Hard rain, like rocks. Hard rain, the kind that turns dry washes into raging, muddy streams before one can get out of the way.

Ned shrieked for the dogs. He had to shriek. They could hear him above the wind and rain only if he screamed at them. He needed them. The sheep and goats must be kept away from the wash. In their fright they might try to hide there from the wind. Even now some were running wildly in that direction. He sent the dogs after them.

While the dogs were chasing the runaway sheep, Ned herded the others toward a clump of junipers where they would be safe from rising water and protected from the wind.

But the sheep had no intention of going where Ned wanted them to go. The goats had even less. They tried to run around him. They went in all directions. Ned ripped a branch from a juniper and swatted at Old Whiskers to make him go toward the clump of junipers. Old Whiskers turned and lowered his

NED OF THE NAVAJOS

head. Ned did not hesitate or jump aside. He jabbed the leafy end of the branch in Old Whiskers' face.

Baa-aaa! Old Whiskers stopped in surprise. He turned and dashed straight for the juniper grove. The other goats followed him. Soon one sheep, then two, then several, also followed. They huddled close to the twisted trunks of the trees.

Ned raced after the other sheep, the ones that still wanted to get into the wash. He swatted at them with the branch, heading them one by one toward the rest of the flock.

Surely all were safe now. But where were the dogs? Ned ran to the clump of junipers. The dogs were not there. He looked over the flock carefully. The goats were all there, nibbling on everything they could reach. The sheep were huddled together in a frightened group. But two were missing.

Ned ran toward the wash. The rain was coming down like gray blankets. He could hardly see. He stumbled over a rock. Panting, he picked himself up and ran on. There was one sheep, pressed against the dry part of a large rock. Ned ran on. It was safe enough for now.

Now he could hear the roaring of water. If the missing sheep was already in the wash, he was too late. He was getting close to the wash, now, and above the noise of the water he could hear the barking of the dogs.

There they were, trying to keep a stupid sheep from jumping into the water.

Ned leaped for the sheep and clung to its short, greasy wool as it struggled to jerk away. Finally he was able to pull it away from the wash. The big dog yelped. Ned turned just in time to see the edge of the bank give way with it. There was a splash as the dog sank into the swift, muddy stream.

Ned watched helplessly as it bobbed up, then sank again. It was a strong dog. Maybe - maybe - it would get out.

He hurried the sheep along toward the others, stopping for the one beside the rock. When they were safe with the flock, he left the smaller dog in charge and ran back toward the wash.

NED OF THE NAVAJOS

He kept away from the banks, not wanting to fall the way the dog had. He followed along the wash. Then he heard a happy bark.

There was the big dog, across on the other side of the wash, sitting beside a rock as if nothing had happened. Ned did not call him. When the water lowered the dog would come across. For the time being he was safe. That was all Ned wanted to know. He turned back to where he had left the sheep.

On the way back he suddenly remembered that he had lost his hat in the wind, and that now he was thoroughly wet from the rain. The wetness did not matter. Soon the sun would shine again and he would dry in the heat. But then he would need the hat.

Old Whiskers was coming to meet him. Then Ned saw what Old Whiskers saw - the hat! Both of them raced for it, and Old Whiskers got there first.

He was ready to take a big bite when Ned grabbed. That was close! Ned jammed the hat on his head and Old Whiskers pawed the wet sand angrily. Then both went over to the junipers.

The rain stopped as suddenly as it had started. The sun shone again, making the drops of water on the bushes into silver pendants. The little puddles glinted in the sunlight. The roar of rushing waters softened and almost died away as the runoff water of the mesas stopped. Soon the canyon would be dry again.

The goats chased each other through the wet sagebrush like romping puppies. The sheep frisked about like lambs, but soon they settled down to eating wet grass and drinking from puddles. As the waters in the wash stopped flowing, the big dog waded across, looking pleased with himself. Ned patted him on the head.

Ned picked up a handful of little rocks to throw at a wind-worn hollow in the cliff. Over the far mesas he could hear the thunder - the Holy People talking to each other. He could see the clouds piled high, the flashes of lightning. The sun was hot,

NED OF THE NAVAJOS

the breeze was cool. Changing Woman had been given a drink from the sky; the thirsty earth had been given water. The earth was beautiful like a new sand painting.