

GHOST SINGER



A NOVEL BY

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UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO PRESS

Albuquerque

PREFACE

BEAUTIFUL MOUNTAIN NAVAJO COUNTRY

JUNE 1830

A lone woman followed six goats into the aspen trees. A large white dog also followed them, ahead of the woman. The goats plodded over the trail, through the thousands of slender, white-barked trees rising up the highest part of the mountain.

As far as the woman could see, the aspens were thick. The goats disappeared into the trees. The forest of white trunks stretched upward, and far above her, silver-green leaves rustled in new summer. Beneath the waving leaves, she thought she heard something else, a muffled noise. A voice?

She stopped momentarily to look around. Her head tilted to hear any small or unusual sound that the trees muffled. Her body tensed, and she strained to hear. Her eyes and stance were on guard as she studied the rustling, silver-green forest. The afternoon sky was not fully visible. It existed in floating patches of blue amid the waving leaves overhead. The goats, knowing well the trail back to their corral, moved out of sight. Gnats flew around the woman's hair and ears, and she brushed at them through the cool air. The forest was dark and definitely cold in some places, although pools of filtered sunlight drifted down through the maze of trees. The woman took a few tenuous steps on the goat trail, cautious and tense over the possibility that strangers might be near. Her feet stopped beside a young spreading fern.

Red Lady was excruciatingly thin and much younger than she looked. Her woven black dress hung loosely over her shoulders and small frame, and was belted at the waist with a rope. Her hair was gathered at the back of her neck. It was quite long, but had been folded several times and wrapped with white yarn. The hem of her black dress ended just below her knees. Buckskin wound down and around her legs to the hard-sole moccasins she wore. The dress had faded in places to a spotty brown. Except for a thin border, a terraced design woven in an uneven orange-brown dye along the hem of the dress, Red Lady was undecorated.

The chirping of birds was all she heard. No other sound mingled with

the leaves rustling above. Nor were there any unusual signs of strangers nearby. She let out a long sigh. The tenseness escaped from her small body with the sigh, and at once her face grew more youthful. She walked on, following the goat trail that led deep through the aspen forest. She walked for nearly a mile before she came to White Sheep's camp.

Six men rode six mules. One of them led four more animals by long, worn, leather straps. Three of the men were very fair. The darkest of the others looked like a mixed blood and was possibly part Indian himself. At this moment the men were silent as their mules began the ascent up the mountain. They had been riding in a southwesterly direction since dawn, straight for the mountainside and the Navajo camps hidden there. Now and then one of the group lifted his eyes from the sandy landscape to the green aspens on the side of the mountain a few miles ahead, an elevation a few hundred feet higher than the level on which they rode.

In the afternoon, the men dismounted to eat cold meat and tortillas under a lone cottonwood tree. They were quiet in this alien desert and now carefully studied one another. Two were middle-aged, and short and bloated by overweight. They looked alike and were actually brothers a year apart in age. They had separated themselves from the others, who sat and lay around the dry wash, nervously eyeing the surrounding terrain.

In the other group were three very fair-skinned men who talked to each other in low tones as they chewed the dry, rolled tortillas. They were also brothers, and very young, possibly approaching their twenties. The odd man in the group had black, shoulder-length hair, black eyes, and a mustache. He wore moccasins, but was otherwise dressed the same as the other men.

After the men ate, they stood and rubbed their backs and buttocks before climbing onto the mules again. The man with the mustache led his mule to the front of the group. He lifted his hand and pointed up the mountain to the grove of aspens. "Not too much longer," he said. The men behind him intently surveyed the aspen forest far above them. Then the small caravan of slave-hunters climbed onto their mules to continue their journey. Their destination was now very close. Three of them, the dark man and the aging brothers, had been here before, had been here several times before. They knew exactly where they were going.

Red Lady approached the clearing on the other side of the aspen grove. The goats were in the corral. She didn't bother to lift and place the logs that would confine them. They wandered about the rest of the day.

Camp consisted of the goat corral and a summer shelter. The shelter had a roof and four walls of aspen logs that ran up and down. The walls were entirely covered with oak boughs. In the east wall was the entrance.

Red Lady entered. The breezy shelter held spots of bright light and darker shadow. At the south end of the shelter, an old man sat on goatskins. He held a squirming a child about a year old. The child, a girl, wore a large, loose shirt. Not far from the old man, a cradleboard rested in a pool of sunlight, leaning against a log beam that supported the shelter's walls. Another child identical to the one squirming in his arms peered out of the cradleboard at the old man. When Red Lady entered, the child in the cradleboard looked at her and smiled. Red Lady went to the old man and took the child from his arms. The old man pushed himself up and went outside.

In the center of the shelter was a fireplace built of mud and sandstone. Red Lady carried the wriggling baby to the fireplace and stirred the charcoal. She built a small fire and poured water, carried from the lake beyond the aspens, into the blackened pot sitting in the ashes, and made a mush of corn meal and water. She fed this to the child she still held. When the child was full, she laid her down on goatskins. The baby promptly closed her eyes and slept. Then Red Lady unlaced the second child from the cradleboard, fed it the mush, and laid it down beside the other one. As soon as the second baby closed her eyes, Red Lady went outside and looked around. The old man was not in sight.

A narrow footpath led to a sunken sweathouse nearly five hundred feet away. The sweathouse was nearly invisible to the sharpest eye. The old man sat just behind it on the trunk of a fallen aspen. He brushed at large black ants crawling from one end of the decaying tree to the other. At his side sat a boy about thirteen or fourteen years old. The old man and the boy were laughing. The youth looked at Red Lady as she approached.

"My mother," the boy asked, "how long will it be before my father returns?" The boy bore a striking resemblance to the woman. His long hair was tied in the same fashion as hers. Under loose-fitting trousers, his body was very lean, his face gaunt. He wore no shirt. His shoulders were

broad, but the bones under the skin were clearly discernible. He stood the same height as his mother.

The woman answered, "Soon. Soon. He should have come back from *Tséyi* by now. Maybe today or tomorrow." She looked off toward the shelter and then toward the trail the boy's father had taken to visit his relatives when he'd left her alone with the boy and the old man, who was Red Lady's father. Although the boy's father was overdue, the woman kept her face clear of the thoughts that had been creeping through her mind.

"We will go check the corn," she said to her son. "The babies are asleep," she said to the old man.

As Red Lady and her son disappeared into the aspens, the old man rose, brushed the ants off himself, and went to gather mountain tobacco. He was dressed like his grandson, except that he wore a faded shirt.

He gathered tobacco for a few minutes, then remembering the babies, he walked leisurely toward the shelter. Camp was quiet and the day was very pleasant. Goats nibbled at tender vegetation sprouting around the corral, but they stopped to watch the old man go into the shelter. The baby girls slept soundly. The old man shook out two goatskins, spread them beside the babies, and lay down too. His long white hair, tied in the back, was loose, and the knot holding his hair together hung beneath his shoulders. He pulled his hair to one side so he could lie flat on his back. He closed his eyes and in a few minutes snored loudly.

Red Lady and her son walked down to their cornfield. It was in a clearing beside the spruce and aspen forest at a lower level on the mountainside. It took several minutes to walk the distance. As they came out of the thick aspen grove where their camp was located, the aspens thinned and spruce trees were dominant. From a nearby overlook they could see the mountainside and the earth lying below them in pastel stripes. The earth's edge stretched upward to meet the sky. They decided to go to the overlook.

They saw jagged rock several miles away, which protruded from the earth in many places and rose to heights of several hundred feet. They saw "the winged rock" and "the speckled rock." Beyond these landmarks were faint mountains in the northeast still covered with snow, and one of these was Big Sheep Mountain, *Dibé Nitsaa*, the people's sacred mountain of the north. Due north of the overlook were other mountains of their enemies, the Utes. They'd been en-

emies since the days before the people came to this place—Beautiful Mountain, as they called it.

Standing together, the woman and the boy surveyed the mesas in the distance and the base of the mountain below. They stood quietly as they had learned to do, listening for distant voices and studying each level of the mountainside meticulously. The scene was quiet and peaceful, without a hint of a stranger in sight. After they had stood at the overlook for a few minutes, Red Lady motioned for her son to follow, and they went on to the cornfield.

Tiny green leaves had sprouted in the rich, black lava soil, and now lifted off the ground. However, the woman was unable to think of corn. Her mind was on the boy's father, *Diné Nez* (Tall Navajo). Surely he should have returned by now.

The woman and the boy opened the ditches to divert water from a spring to the rows of corn. Rain usually came to the mountain every day, but when it was sparse, the woman, the boy, and *Diné Nez* watered the corn from the spring where water seeped out of the mountainside. When the last plant had water trickling around it, they closed the ditches with crude hoes, and started for camp.

Approaching the camp shelter, they found two visitors waiting, although there were three horses tied along the edge of the aspen grove. The visitors were a young man and an old man. The older man was called Thin Man, and the younger, Thin Man's Son. When Red Lady and the boy entered the shelter, the visitors greeted them and then continued to talk to Red Lady's father, White Sheep. They explained that they'd come after White Sheep so that he might sing over another of Thin Man's sons, who was very ill. White Sheep agreed to go with them.

Then Red Lady listened reluctantly as the visitors told of fearful strangers in the land. Thin Man spoke of a raid that had been made on a family near Wild Horse Canyon, which was a little distance north below the mountain. Red Lady looked thoughtfully at her children—the boy, called Tall Navajo's Son, and her infant twin daughters.

Thin Man added that in the Wild Horse Canyon raid, women had been left alone by their families and were stolen. An old woman and another in middle age were killed. A very young girl, about eight or nine, was carried off by the strangers. But along with the girl were her own two young aunts. This had occurred less than a month before.

And in *Tséyi*, it had happened again, but several families had suffered. A young boy, a toddler, was carried away with a married woman and her three children. The little boy and the woman were from different families. The toddler had been caught quite easily when he wandered off from the camp by himself. He was captured first. Later, the young boy's father and two other men caught up with the slave-hunters at the place where the woman and her children were captured. In the melee that broke out when the slave-hunters made their escape, the toddler's father and the woman's old mother were killed. The Navajos had managed to wound one of the enemies, but not seriously. There were three slave-hunters besides the wounded one. The woman with her old mother had been alone with the children. One of the woman's children was not even weaned. This, too, had occurred a little more than a month ago.

Red Lady refused to hear any more. She moved toward the door. The infants were awake and they crawled toward her. At the shelter entrance she paused. Thin Man's words rang in her ears. One of her babies was at her feet. She stooped over to pick up the baby and went outside.

Two days had passed, and dawn was near. A fire glowed in the shelter. Red Lady, Tall Navajo's Son, and White Sheep were awake. The babies slept under goatskins while Red Lady prepared the morning meal. Her son and the old man sat close to the fire, the orange flames coloring their faces. Tall Navajo's Son was restless and uneasy. He had not slept well. He had been pacing back and forth between the fire and the shelter entrance since early morning while his mother and grandfather still slept. The wood popped in the fireplace, and Tall Navajo's Son jumped at each popping sound. His mother noticed his uneasiness as soon as she awoke, as did White Sheep.

Finally, Tall Navajo's Son could not contain himself any longer and fled into the forest. It was still dark when he left. Several minutes passed, but he did not return.

He ran in the direction of the slowing rising sun, trying to clear his mind. He had dreamed a terrible, frightening thing. He would run from it if he could, but he was too intrigued by its meaning. He wanted to be alone, to think. His father had not returned. . . .

He found himself near the cornfield. He recognized two or three birds from their screams as he approached the cornfield clearing. A wood-

pecker flew over him. First, he looked at the corn, and then he went down to the lookout where he and his mother were two days earlier. By then the sun was a hand high over the curving horizon. The morning was cool and the mountains in the north were distant, although they appeared to be much closer than they actually were.

He did not mistake the sound of gunshots. One. Two. They were heard easily from where he was. The gunshots cracked from the direction of White Sheep's camp.

Tall Navajo's Son ran as fast as he could back to camp. It took only several minutes, but it took too long. He was sweaty, and his chest heaved. As he approached, he heard departing voices, perhaps three male speakers, and hooves breaking through the forest. The voices faded. Then very clearly he heard a baby cry, a dog growl, and the goats bleat over the baby's cry. Far off in the distance he recognized his mother's scream. She warned her unseen son, "Run, son, run! Get away!" But he couldn't tell exactly where her voice was in the aspen trees. Then Red Lady's screams stopped. The forest was silent. A noisy woodpecker was the only presence.

Camp was deadly quiet. The goats did not bleat, but two of them looked at Tall Navajo's Son curiously. He did not see all the goats and wondered why the slave-hunters hadn't taken them too. He had heard of slave-hunters taking sheep and goats whenever it was possible. He stood between the corral and the shelter.

Faint sounds came to his ears. They did not come from the goats. He entered the shelter. It was empty. The fire still glowed dully. Tall Navajo's Son strained to listen again. "Grandfather," he said very softly. The unidentified sounds came again. Tall Navajo's Son thought of the sweathouse.

On the path to the sweathouse, one of the missing goats met him. Then, just into the thick of the forest, he found White Sheep lying face-up on the ground. Gnats buzzed around him and large black ants crawled on him. Blood covered his face and body.

He felt White Sheep's body. Two places were torn open, one just under White Sheep's rib cage, and one above his right hip. Tall Navajo's Son wiped some of the blood off White Sheep. Then he gently lifted the old man's head to cradle it in his hands. He turned White Sheep's head from side to side. That was when he saw that White Sheep's left ear was entirely gone, along with part of his right.

Blood continued to ooze into Tall Navajo's Son's hands. He pulled

one of them from underneath and let the warm blood trickle onto the ground. With his other, he lifted White Sheep's head completely off the ground. More blood dripped from the back of it. Tall Navajo's Son then understood; the slave-hunters had tried to take some of the old man's hair, as well as his ears.

Tall Navajo's Son cradled the old man in his arms for a long time. When the boy finally gave up hope and it seemed that death was certain, he laid the old man down. But then White Sheep opened his eyes and managed to turn to his grandson. In a hoarse whisper, White Sheep said, "Get the baby."

The boy was stunned. "What?" he asked.

White Sheep again whispered. "Get the baby. . . . I hid her in the sweathouse, under a black goatskin. . . ."

NAVAJO RESERVATION

OCTOBER 1968

It was the longest day of the Northern Navajo Fair. People began to line Route 666 at the south side of Shiprock, New Mexico, about six that morning. For the tiny community, there had been heavy traffic all night. The line of spectators forming for the parade extended eastward past the junction that led to Cortez, Colorado, and toward Farmington, New Mexico. By nine, pickup trucks and cars lined both side of the two-lane highway. And the columns of people on both sides of the road stretched into a couple of miles.

The parade was scheduled to begin at ten, but it had never actually started right on time in the last ten years. Vendors circulated through the crowd, selling helium-filled balloons, soft drinks, monkeys on sticks, and a variety of other things to the spectators.

The spectators were, for the most part, Indians, mainly Navajos. The older Navajos, both men and women, were carefully dressed. The women wore flared sateen skirts and velvet blouses, while the men wore jeans and cowboy or velveteen shirts. Turquoise and silver were abundantly displayed in their hair, on their ears, on their wrists and fingers, and in their belts and heavy necklaces. The elders even wore moccasins with silver buttons. They were the most picturesque group here, the most formidable for all their fragile bones and numerous years. They were the memorable ones in the thousands gathered together.

The Navajo youths were faceless, looking much like young people anywhere in the United States. Of course, there were a few exceptions.

Among the Navajos were a few Pueblo Indians—distinguishable from the Navajos by their hair style and clothing. There were also representatives from other tribes, who, like the few Anglos there, were lost among the dominant Navajos.

The smell of coffee and a variety of foods filled the air. The odors wafted from the west side of the highway, where crude, roughly-hewn concession stands held Navajo vendors catering to the familiar Navajo

appetites. A cool breeze carried the smell of food to the line of spectators, causing people from the roadside lines to cross back and forth to the stands for a cup of coffee or something to fill their stomachs.

Already, a thin cloud of dust hung over the people. As the day grew, the dust would overpower them. In this town and on the reservation in general, only the main roads, of which there were too few, were paved. Other roadways were sand and clay, which lifted in a fine silt under heavy use. This, like other things, was part of reservation life.

Finally, the parade began. It noisily and slowly made its way from east to west and then south. There were seventy-seven floats, all accompanied by deafening music and built to resemble a variety of things, including hogans (Navajo homes), oil derricks, mesas, landmarks such as Shiprock or Window Rock, schoolhouses, and over seventy other shapes and forms. Between the floats were bands from the reservation high schools, with Navajo majorettes, tribal officials in elegant cars, and numerous "princesses" of Indian clubs and other organizations, sitting either on top of a bright blanket on the hood of a car or on horseback.

The seventh in the line of princesses was a petite teen-age girl. She wore a black woven dress, an ancient dress that was faded in places to a spotty brown. The dress had been skillfully repaired in several places. The hem was calf-length on the girl. About knee length ran an orange-brown terraced design the width of the dress on both front and back. The girl wore moccasins, and her legs were wrapped in white buckskin to her knees. Around her waist was a new, wide sash belt interwoven in red, green, and white, and over the sash was a thin metal belt made of shiny silver links centered with turquoise nuggets. Several strands of turquoise chunks hung around the girl's neck, and her wrists were adorned with a number of silver bracelets.

The girl waved first right and then left. She didn't actually smile, but merely acknowledged the people's presence around her.

She had soft, deep-set, black eyes. In startling contrast, her hair was a deep, rich, mahogany brown. It was tied in the Navajo hairstyle, and a trail of long, white yarn hung down the girl's back. She wore no make-up. Long turquoise earrings framed her face, as did a high, sparkling, silver crown resting on her forehead and red-brown hair. A large ribbon-like banner was draped over her right shoulder and down under her left arm proclaiming RED POINT INDIAN CLUB in gold letters.

The girl sat on the hood of a new 1968 sedan. Signs were tacked on both sides of the car. The letters said NASBAH NAVAJO, PRINCESS 1968, RED POINT, ARIZONA. From the loudspeakers resting on the roof of the car came a recording of a Navajo chant.

Nasbah Navajo scanned the crowd. She was aware of an Anglo woman who had been following the car for the last half mile. The woman easily kept pace with the moving vehicle. Actually, the car crept along and came to a halt several times in the course of the parade. Just when and where the woman had begun to follow, Nasbah did not know, but she had become aware of her on the bridge. Nasbah did not turn directly to the woman but watched her out of the corner of her eye. Yes, she was definitely following. The woman's clothing, a smudge of pink and yellow, moved through the crowd.

"Nasbah!" someone yelled. Nasbah turned to the sound of her name and discovered several relatives waving and laughing. She returned a broad smile.

The parade neared the end. The floats were all turning off the main highway onto a dirt side road. The dust was thicker at this end of town. The driver of Nasbah's car followed the floats onto the side road, but drove farther back and away from the other vehicles. The car stopped. Nasbah climbed down off the hood, took the blanket, folded it, and put it inside the car. She slammed the car door shut as three girls came running up to her. They were the same girls who had called her name earlier in the parade. "Nasbah," one of them said, "let's go to the carnival."

Nasbah agreed, but first turned back to the driver's side of the car. She spoke quietly to the driver for a few minutes, accepted the money that he gave her, and then hurried to meet the other girls.

Nasbah saw the Anglo woman approach from the corner of her eye. She didn't actually see the woman, but recognized the colors she wore. Now that the woman was getting closer, Nasbah could really see her. She was a middle-aged woman with graying hair. The woman spoke. "Honey, could I speak to you for a minute?" The three girls with Nasbah stepped back and waited.

"Me?" Nasbah asked, though she already knew whom the woman meant. Nasbah didn't move.

"Why, yes," the woman said with a pleasant smile. "You may not have noticed, but I've been following you for awhile now." The woman's face

was dotted with perspiration, and she wiped it away with a tissue. The woman looked at Nasbah's dress. Nasbah didn't know if the woman expected a response or not. She didn't offer one.

"I'm a collector," the woman said, looking into Nasbah's deep-set eyes. She wondered if Nasbah understood what a collector was. "I collect rugs," she continued. "I'm very interested in your dress. It appears to be very old. I thought you might be interested in selling me the dress."

Nasbah watched the woman touch the dress and check the repaired places on it. Then the woman's fingers traced the orange-brown terraced design, studying it carefully.

The woman said, "You know, I was right. This dress is very old. Did you know that?" She smiled sweetly at Nasbah. Then she said, "I would be willing to pay one thousand dollars for this dress, honey."

The woman searched her purse for something. She pulled out a card and said, "Honey, my name is on this card. I'm staying in Farmington at this place. Talk over my offer with your parents, and if they're interested in selling the dress, come and see me. But do it soon. I must go back to Sedona tomorrow."

Nasbah accepted the card. She said, "The dress belongs to me."

The woman answered, "Well, honey, whoever owns the dress has a very valuable item there."

The woman walked away, and the three girls ran to Nasbah. "One thousand dollars!" they said. At that moment, the car on which Nasbah had ridden honked. It had not moved yet.

Nasbah ran back to the car. This time she did not go to the driver's side. She opened the back door and got inside.

The driver was a man, Nasbah's father. Sitting beside him was a woman in a red velveteen dress. She had Nasbah's deep-set eyes. In the back seat was an old man who might have stepped out of another time. His long hair was white, and it was wrapped in white yarn. He wore long turquoise earrings and a purple velveteen shirt that had silver buttons around the collar and rows of quarters and dimes down the sleeves. He sat very straight.

"What did she want?" the old man asked Nasbah in the Navajo language.

Nasbah answered, "The dress. It's the same every time I wear it. The white people want to buy the dress."

"How much?" the old man asked.

"A thousand dollars," Nasbah said in Navajo.

The old man shook his head from side to side. "They are offering more now. Whatever is offered will never be enough."

Nasbah got out of the car and went to the three girls who were waiting for her. The people in the car were going to stay where they were until the traffic cleared.

The old man in the back of the car was content to sit and watch everyone through the glass.