Chapter One

CHILDHOOD INTERRUPTED
Jodie

"Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it."

Proverbs 22:6 (NIV)

Wil was born in 1946 in a house with a midwife and a medicine man present. His was a fairly typical beginning for a young Navajo growing up in the southwest at the time. His parents were seasonal workers. They followed crops. Wil grew up among brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, great uncles and aunts, and cousins, and like most traditional Navajo households, his elders, including his grandparents, only spoke Navajo, maybe a few words of English. Life on the reservation was not easy. His and other Native American families had to overcome severe economic and social obstacles, to be sure; however, Wil's childhood had an extra dose of dysfunction.

Three-year old Wil Yazzie had watched his dad and his buddies get drunk on more than one occasion. When the men weren't working, they were drinking. Still, things
had to get done. One day in the summer of 1949, Mr. Yazzie had orders from Mrs. Yazzie to go fetch supplies, booze and groceries, in that order. Wil remembers being selected from among his siblings to ride along. He considered himself the lucky kid, the one who got to leave and go to town with his father. Sadly, getting into a vehicle with a drunk relative behind the wheel was quite common for Native American children.

Wil, born before the era of seat belts and car seats, was already exposed to dangerous driving situations—even without the drunk driver risk factor. A seat belt check would have been a good idea, had there been such a safety feature, but it wasn't until 1968 that the U.S. National Highway Safety Bureau first required automobile manufacturers to install lap belts for all seats and shoulder belts for front seats.

In his haste or haze, Wil's father allowed young Wil to climb into his side of the pickup truck on his own. Wil did all right for his age. Johnson was not completely drunk out of his mind. He must have been paying some attention because Wil remembers his father's gravelly voice saying, "Door's not shut, son," but he did nothing to correct the situation.

A partially unlatched passenger door wasn't a problem until later when Wil's father yanked on the steering wheel too hard. Johnson later told the police he was trying to avoid hitting something on the roadway though he couldn't say for sure what it was. But instead of slowing down, the hazardous driver's decision caused his young son to be thrown from the moving vehicle.

Like a piece of unwanted debris, Wil tumbled out of the moving pick-up truck onto a stretch of uneven pavement. His body eventually came to a stop in a ditch, his lacerations filled with highway gravel and grime. To a distant observer, the boy would have resembled remnants of an exhausted tumbleweed. It had to have been by the grace of God that young Wil Yazzie did not wake up by the side of the road. Instead, he woke up bruised and battered in a hospital bed with nurses and doctors there to comfort him.

Given that inebriated parents who drive with young children are not well liked, the medical personnel who cared for Wil that day must have struggled with the reality facing this young accident victim. Wil could have easily died. Could any good possibly come from this tragedy? Medical and law enforcement personnel in the region had to cope with the ugly truth that Wil would probably not be the only victim involved an
alcohol related accident coming in that week. Native Americans driving while under the influence was, and continues to be, a problem in the southwest.

Thankfully, young Wil's damaged body healed quickly. After the bandages came off, Wil went on to attend elementary school in Shiprock, New Mexico where he played sports for the Shiprock Braves. Then, like every migrant worker kid, Wil had to switch schools when Johnson Yazzie got a job in Cortez, Colorado. At his new school, he was one of only three Navajo students. A novelty among "Anglo" students, Wil performed tribal dances and became an instant celebrity. An enterprising youth, Wil was smart enough to charge admission for the show, which didn't begin until he had collected fifty cents. He then used his earnings to go to the movies and buy Cokes and popcorn.

With plenty of bravado to go along with his intriguing Navajo ways, this future actor discovered he was quite comfortable in the limelight. He had found at least one place to shine. Even though being the Indian attraction had unexpected economic benefits, Wil felt relieved when his family moved back to the reservation. Savoring what he could from his short-term, pop idol status, he returned to the safe haven of living among his people. However, getting an education at a Bureau of Indian Affairs school would have lasting repercussions. In Wil's case, the first unexpected challenge was the language barrier.

"We were not allowed to speak our native language," Wil said referring to himself and his friends who, along with him, were punished for speaking Navajo.

It took years for Wil to be able to work through his painful memories of being forced to speak English. If he didn't (or couldn’t) formulate the proper words, his teachers smacked his knuckles with wooden rulers. Following the ruler smacking or other such punishment, Wil and the other stubborn Navajo speakers were required to stand in a corner of the classroom, a left-over government tactic to "erase and replace" Indian culture.

"Because I was not a fluent English speaker, many times I had to guess what people were saying," Wil said. "I didn't understand why school officials were forcing me to be someone I was not."

Wil was required to cut his shiny, thick, black hair, something he and other traditional Navajo boys would not have done if given the choice. Apparently, the United
States government was in charge of hairstyles and language choices and Navajo children had no choice but to assimilate.

For many Navajo families, BIA boarding schools were accepted as the perfect free childcare plan. They dropped their children off in the fall and picked them up in the spring. Plain and simple. If they were lucky, some students enjoyed family visitations during the school year. When family members managed to show up on campus for a weekend visit, Wil felt twinges of resentment. Relatives brought homemade delicacies along with bags of store bought treats. Sometimes parents would attend athletic events and take children home for the weekend. Those kids were the lucky ones.

Like many of his friends, Wil had to deal with being separated from loved ones for long periods of time. Boarding school was, at times, a strange battle for Wil. He did what he could to fill the hollow gap his parents had created. When it came to making the best of a bad situation, he came up with a system for coping—he surrounded himself with people and kept busy. His report card, though it was filled with good grades and positive comments, was not enough to earn him family visitations.

Despite unnecessary chastisement and bouts of loneliness, Wil enjoyed school. Without much effort on his part, he gained the attention and respect of his classmates and athletic coaches. A natural athlete, he joined a team each season. Flag football, track, basketball or softball—no matter what the sport, Wil excelled in them all. Sports became Wil's outlet for frustration and pent-up energy.

People took a genuine liking to Wil. He was friendly with the dormitory staff, coaches, and students. Adults noticed and admired the way he took care of the younger students. Acting like a concerned big brother, he took the little ones under his wing and watched after them. He protected them from older bullies. Like any normal child, he felt the sting of being left behind by alcoholic parents. He had both instinct and aptitude for helping others less fortunate than himself. If his teachers or coaches saw evidence of Wil's intuitive leadership skills, they didn't do much to nurture it. Although he was developing a servant's heart, it would be many years before someone encouraged him to make the most of his gifts.

Unfortunately, while Wil was away at school enjoying athletic endeavors and budding friendships, his parents divorced. In the midst of the family turmoil, a social
worker decided Wil and his siblings should live with their grandparents on their farm. It wasn't long before Wil's sisters gave up on rural life. Episodes of sexual abuse had taken their toll. Not surprisingly, they took off and went back to Shiprock.

Wil stayed behind. He worked through the sweltering summer months. Among his many farm chores, his least favorite was plowing unwilling wrinkles into unyielding dirt with a worn out mule. It was especially aggravating because while he dutifully did what was expected of him, his cousins sat around and watched.

His family life splintered by divorce and plagued by poverty, Wil's childhood was far from what most would call happy or normal. His diligence and hard work often went unacknowledged, and because of that he actually looked forward to going back to boarding school, the place where he would take his first alcoholic drink.