

**CODE
WARD
COURAGE**

KIRBY LARSON



SCHOLASTIC PRESS / NEW YORK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Larson, Kirby, author.

Title: Code word courage / Kirby Larson.

Description: First edition. | New York : Scholastic Press, 2018. | Summary:
In September 1944 eleven-year-old Billie lives with her great aunt, Doff,
eagerly waiting for her older brother Leo to return from boot camp, and
desperate to find the father that left when she was little; but Leo brings a
friend with him, a Navajo named Denny, and the injured dog they have
rescued and named Bear—and when the two young men go off to war Bear
becomes the thread that ties them all together, and helps Billie to find a
true friend.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017035321 | ISBN 9780545840750

Subjects: LCSH: Dogs—Juvenile fiction. | Families—Juvenile fiction. | Navajo
Indians—Juvenile fiction. | Navajo code talkers—Juvenile fiction. | World
War, 1939–1945—United States—Juvenile fiction. | Friendship—Juvenile
fiction. | United States—History—1933–1945—Juvenile fiction. | CYAC:
Dogs—Fiction. | Family life—Fiction. | Navajo Indians—Fiction. | Indians
of North America—California—Fiction. | Navajo code talkers—Fiction. |
World War, 1939–1945—United States—Fiction. | Friendship—Fiction. |
United States—History—1933–1945—Fiction. | LCGFT: Historical fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.L32394 Cm 2018 | DDC 813.54 [Fic]—dc23

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

18 19 20 21 22

Printed in the U.S.A. 23

First edition, May 2018

Book design by Maeve Norton

CHAPTER ONE

Billie

Friday, September 22, 1944

Billie Packer didn't need to be a detective to figure out who'd shot the spit wad now glued to her pigtail. Not from the way Spinner Greeley and Del Randall were yukking it up a few seats back.

Doff said such attentions were a boy's way of saying he liked a girl. But Doff was somewhere north of seventy years old, and didn't realize that, in 1944, most boys did not shoot spit wads as a sign of affection. Nor did they steal milk money or accidentally-on-purpose trip people.

Billie pulled her hair away from her face, trying to summon the courage to touch the disgusting thing stuck there. This was more than a potential case of boy cooties. Spinner and Del suffered from a

fatal case of the stupids, a disease she definitely didn't want to catch.

The new kid reached across the bus aisle. "Here," he said.

She hesitated. What kind of fifth grader carried handkerchiefs? "It's all ironed and everything," she protested.

"Mamá would iron *me* if I stood still long enough." His smile lit up brown eyes behind a pair of horn-rimmed glasses. "Go on. Take it."

"Thanks." They were practically neighbors, but this was the first time they'd spoken. "Tito."

Spinner shot another spit wad, which bounced off the back of Billie's seat. Kit McDonald giggled. "Nice shot!" she said. Hazel French joined the laughter.

Billie squinched her eyes in her former best pal's direction. Right about the time Leo left for boot camp, Hazel had fallen under Kit's spell and her brain had been turned to mush over boys and movie stars. And bras. At least Kit needed the one she wore. Billie glanced down at her own chest, which, like Hazel's, was as flat as a game board.

She used the handkerchief to pry the disgusting object from her hair, nodding toward the back of the bus. “Those guys are louts.”

“Fancy word.” Tito nodded appreciatively. “Not sure what it means, but I like the sound of it.”

“Awkward and ill-mannered fellows.” Billie shook the spit wad from the carefully ironed hanky and kicked it under the seat in front of her. “Describes them to a T.”

When Billie turned eleven, her great-aunt Doff deemed her old enough to touch the whisper-thin pages of the ancient dictionary enthroned on the stand in the parlor. *Deemed*—“to give or pronounce judgment”—was another of the words that had snagged Billie’s attention. When she peered through the antique bone-handled magnifying glass, she felt like a true explorer, discovering new continents in the worlds of microscopic black-and-white print.

Another spit wad bounced off her saddle shoe. Despite the fact they couldn’t hit a target at five paces, the baboons in the back howled even louder. She scooted away from the aisle, closer to her little

second-grade seatmate. It would take more than a few spit wads to ruin Billie's day.

The minute her brother stepped on that bus for San Diego, six long weeks ago, Billie had begun her countdown. That first night, the one red X on the Feed and Seed calendar looked utterly lonely. But now it had forty-one brothers and sisters. And Leo was on his way home on a weekend pass. She had everything planned: a drive into town, with time on the pier, a picnic out beyond the avocado orchard, and lots of rounds of Criss Cross Words. She was determined to make each moment count.

Leo bragged that once he got to fighting, the Germans and the Japs would hightail it for the hills. "It'll be over like that," he'd said, with a finger snap. But nobody knew when the war might end. Not even Mr. Edward R. Murrow, who'd been covering it since before Uncle Sam got in the fight.

Mr. Murrow's broadcasts were the only ones Doff trusted. Last Sunday, he'd reported live from a C-47 airplane as nineteen American paratroopers parachuted into Holland. Billie held her breath as

she listened. “They’re getting ready to jump,” he’d said in his strong voice. “There they go! Three, four, five . . . Seventeen, eighteen, nineteen!” When he’d described the men dropping down beside a windmill, near a little church, Billie felt she’d been right there with them. She’d hardly slept that night, thinking of those brave soldiers stepping out of a plane, held in the air like tiny spiderlings by those fine silk chutes. Mr. Murrow’s reports were enthralling, but Billie had listened to them for three long years. Leo could brag all he wanted, but Billie worried that the war might never end.

The bus bounced past the Stewarts’ house, jostling Billie back to the present. There was Stanley riding his trike around his little sister, Didi, clutching her beloved MuMu Monkey. Stanley bumped into his sister and she ran for the house to tattle. It was a situation Billie knew all too well from hours of babysitting those two.

The bus juddered onto the shoulder, wheezing to a stop. Hazel and Kit hopped off, arm in arm. Mrs. French probably had some icebox cookies

waiting for them. Though Billie knew why, it still hurt that Hazel had stopped saving seats for her. Stopped wanting to have sleepovers, or debating which was the best Wizard of Oz story. No more cutting pictures out of the Monkey Ward catalog, dreaming of what they'd buy if they had one hundred dollars. Clearly, Hazel had written Billie's name in pencil in her book of life, easy to erase.

After her seatmate got off, Billie slid over to the window, resting her head. Perhaps the jostling would bounce worries about Hazel right out of her mind.

The bus hit a pothole and Billie grabbed the armrest to keep from flying off the seat. A magazine landed in the aisle. *Sky and Telescope*.

She picked it up and handed it to Tito.

"That was a good film strip today." He pushed his glasses up on his nose. "My old school was for Mexican kids only. No film strips. Or even a library."

"Every school has a library!"

Tito peered at her, as if inspecting a strange bug. "One time, some church donated books they'd

collected.” He shrugged. “Papá says his job for your aunt is an answer to our prayer. A good school for me and good work for him.”

“Well, with Leo in the Marines, Doff needed help.” Tito’s father was the third ranch manager hired since August. No local man would take the job; Doff was that hard to work for. But, after his first week, Mr. Garcia had taken home a jar of Doff’s prize-winning preserves. A sure sign of her approval.

“If you like big words, this is for you.” Tito held up his magazine. “Would you like to borrow it sometime?”

Through the window, Billie could see Kit and Hazel scurry toward Hazel’s house. Did Mrs. French call Kit pumpkin, like she had Billie? Would she serve them milk coffee with their after-school snack? Did Hazel even play the “if I had a hundred dollars game” anymore?

Billie sighed. Surely, there weren’t expiration dates on friendship, like there were on ration stamps. There had to be something she could do to be Hazel’s friend again.