

# **CHANGING WOMAN SPEAKS**

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **Between Two Worlds**

The Phoenix sky is dark and ominous as I step out of the airport terminal and climb into the front seat of the car beside the Navajo medicine man. Great jagged streaks of searing white lightning tear across the heavens and slash down to the earth in every direction. They are relentless and all around us as we head north out of Phoenix towards Flagstaff and the Rez.

As many times as I've been to Phoenix, nothing seems familiar. The lightning is disorienting, and he's driving on back roads I've never seen before to avoid the rush hour traffic. I'm in his territory now, and this Navajo man who I've known for several years is taking me somewhere way up north tonight to the Navajo Indian Reservation where he's going to sneak me into a private ceremony.

Just an hour ago I was on a plane flying in from New York, having spent a week with the editors of Reader's Digest in our corporate headquarters in Pleasantville, thirty miles north of Manhattan. Three other top advertising sales executives and I had been chosen from our New York, Detroit, Chicago, and West Coast offices to be immersed in the magazine's unique editorial process while honing our own editing skills.

I'd spent this morning working on our final assignment in a private office, sitting at an antique French writing desk and gazing up at a lovely painting of ballerinas hanging on the wall in front of me. Suddenly, I realized it was an original Degas—later to be sold by Sotheby's for over six million dollars—and I was sitting at the desk of Lila Wallace, Reader's Digest's beloved co-founder, art collector, and philanthropist. I immediately felt my spirit lift and my back straighten. The beauty and elegance of this room and Mrs. Wallace's legacy inspired me to do my very best work.

My colleagues and I had been given only one hour to edit a nine-page Newsweek article down to one and a half pages for Reader's Digest. The editor apologized for the time limitation as he hustled us off to private offices, saying, "It's an impossible task in an hour, but please do the best you can."

Exactly one hour later, a senior editor reviewed my work and was thrilled that I'd nearly replicated, word-for-word, his own edit of the same article which was about to be published. News of my achievement quickly circulated the hallowed offices, and I was patted on the back and told they would hire me on the spot if I were applying for an editor's job. It was obvious they hadn't expected this from an advertising salesperson. It had been a good week for me, and I would be remembered for it.

I bid farewell to my colleagues at noon and climbed into the Lincoln Town Car that would take me to John F. Kennedy Airport. I had less than an hour to figure out a wardrobe change from my corporate suit and heels to a Navajo ceremonial outfit, whatever that might look like. On the way to the airport, my driver graciously dropped me off at the White Plains shopping mall and waited while I tore through the racks at The Limited looking for something that would work. Thirty minutes later I emerged wearing a calf-length, tiered denim skirt, a western-style blouse, and a tooled leather belt which paired with the boots I had worn to New York. I told the salesgirl I was headed to Arizona, and she envisioned me at a fancy dude ranch. *That's close enough*, I thought to myself as I hustled out.

In the car, I plaited my long brown hair in a single French braid down my back. I'd read traditional Navajo women don't leave their long hair hanging loose but arrange it in a special bun. I couldn't do that, so the braid was my effort to be respectful, and I hoped I looked appropriate. It was the best I could do in a pinch, and I was amazed I pulled it all together so fast.

Before my plane took off, I left a message for my best friend back in San Francisco telling him where I was going and with whom. He thought I was flying back to the Bay Area tonight and would assume I'd check in when I decompressed from my week in New York. Without this call, no one would ever know I changed my flight to land in Phoenix and would soon be somewhere deep in the native lands of northern Arizona. My voicemail ended with, "If I don't call you by Sunday evening, I want you to know where I was last headed and with whom!"

Five hours later, my plane dropped down through the altitude levels into a different climate, a different culture, and a totally different reality. As we taxied to the gate, I tried to prepare myself for what I'd signed up for. I wasn't scared, but very nervous with a million questions. This wasn't another Navajo workshop but the real deal, a chance to go to the Navajo

Reservation with my teacher and friend and attend a real ceremony. I wasn't going to miss it for the world, as I might never have another opportunity to do this.

I met James three years ago in Nine Gates Mystery School, a spiritual retreat program in northern California which focused on the nine energy centers of the body. The teachers included an African shaman from Togo, a Sufi, a Navajo medicine man, and a Tibetan monk who shared their traditional teachings, songs, and ceremonies with our group. When the program ended, many of us continued to study with our favorite teachers, and most of us gravitated to James whenever he could come back to California.

He was introduced to us as a full-blooded Navajo medicine man who was raised in Tuba City, Arizona on the Navajo Indian Reservation. His father was a Navajo Code Talker in World War II, and his paternal grandfather was a formidable Navajo medicine man himself, and the first Vice Chairman of the Navajo Nation. James' teachings run deep, and he has helped a lot of people through his people's traditional ways.

I was surprised to learn that he's also a college-educated businessman. When I met him, he was working for a large financial services company in Phoenix, with large corporate clients in northern California. Now he lives in Flagstaff, Arizona where he owns a computer consulting business and a Chinese restaurant on the Navajo Reservation. He opened the restaurant over a year ago to provide jobs for his son, his eldest daughter, and her partner, who is a Chinese chef. But now something is has gone awry, and evidently this ceremony is the only thing that can uncover what that is.

Peking Gardens was a success from the moment it opened in Tuba City, a small town on the western side of the Reservation not far from the Grand Canyon. The Chinese food was excellent, and the restaurant was the only game in town aside from the Navajo tacos and burger

stand across the street from the gas station. They were full every night and James's family was having fun running it, until the business started to implode.

One weekend, the chef flew back to San Francisco's Chinatown to visit his family and was spirited away and not heard from again. Six weeks passed before he was able to secretly relay a message back through a friend that he couldn't return. Evidently, his traditional Chinese parents didn't think too highly of their first-born son being with a Native American woman, and they had no intention of letting him return to Arizona. Never mind that they had a beautiful baby daughter together. That probably made it worse. He was essentially kidnapped, and it was clear he wouldn't be back. Ever.

With the chef gone and the staff devastated, the sous chef stepped in and did a great job replicating the traditional Chinese dishes. The restaurant was always busy, but the business began bleeding money. He's looked at the books, spent time in the restaurant, and talked with the staff, but couldn't figure out the problem. Then bizarre car accidents started happening in rapid succession, first with James, then with different family members in the restaurant's parking lot.

I was in New York when he called to tell me he'd hired a medicine man do a reading. The medicine man had read the crystals and said there was black magic involved and that a protection ceremony was needed as soon as possible. It was scheduled for this weekend, the weekend I was flying home from New York.

I jumped at the chance to be invited. He's my spiritual teacher, but we're also now business confidants. He's been talking about his restaurant problems for months, so I knew the issues and how precarious things were. Plus, a lot of things were getting weird for me in our California ceremonies, jealousy and mean things being said behind my back, so maybe I can learn something that will help me too.

He explained this would be a private ceremony without his family or the restaurant staff. It would just be him and the medicine man. But I pleaded my case hard, coming from the place of supportive friend and colleague, while trying not to sound too pushy. It would be so easy for me to stop in Phoenix on the way home, so I felt like it was a sign I should be there. Finally, he decided it would be safe to invite me. He said if I could swing it, he'd pick me up at the Phoenix airport and we'd drive up together.

So that's how I got here, fresh off the plane from New York, and heading into the unknown. James is being unusually quiet, and I can't tell if he's nervous about the ceremony, wondering why in the world he invited me, or just concentrating on what needs to be done. He's only a few years older than me but looks so much older. He's my height, five foot six inches, with balding grey hair, and a stocky build. In business settings, he suits up and looks nice, and often wears a diamond ring on his right hand. This evening he's in blue jeans and cowboy boots, with no diamond ring. He's dressed down for the Rez.

We exit the interstate at Flagstaff and head towards Kmart to buy supplies.

"What do you need for the ceremony?" I ask.

"For this one," he says, "we need to provide a rifle and ammunition, along with breakfast food that I've already gotten, and cash, all as the exchange."

"What's the rifle for?" I ask, as nonchalantly as I can.

"I'll explain on the drive to Tuba City. Right now, you can come in with me, but I need you to lay low and let me go to the gun counter by myself. There's going to be Navajos in here, and I don't want to take the chance that someone will figure out what we're doing."

*How could anyone possibly guess what we are doing? I wonder. And why would it matter?* He seems a little anxious now, and that is making me nervous.

We enter the Kmart separately, a grey-haired Navajo man and a white lady in crisp new western clothes. I can see why he doesn't want to walk in with me. I look out of place here, and walking in together would certainly raise eyebrows. I move slowly through the aisles by myself, picking up a few things to snack on while he goes to the gun counter at the back of the store to purchase the rifle and ammunition. I feel like every Indian in the place is watching me.

As I walk by one native couple, the skin crawls on the back of my neck. I sense suspicion in their eyes as they discreetly glance at me. Have they guessed what we're up to? Is it because I'm a white woman? No, there are lots of other Anglos in the store. It's because of what James said when we walked in. He doesn't want to take chances. I still don't know what that means, but the power of suggestion is strong.

Leaving Kmart with supplies in hand, we head east out of Flagstaff along old Route 66, then turn north onto Highway 89 towards Page, Arizona. The landscape begins to change as the pine forests give way to sandy outcroppings and strange windswept formations that I can just make out in the darkness. We pass a wooden sign that reads, "You Are Now Entering the Navajo Reservation," and this escapade starts to get very real.

I ask about the rifle again. "What is it for?"

"The rifle will be placed inside by the door," he says, "in case something happens."

"What do you mean? What kinds of things might happen?" I ask.

"Anything can happen when you do a ceremony like this. Sometimes things come to the door. Just keep your eyes and ears open and stay alert."

That's all he's going to say, so no point in asking anything else. We don't talk much for the last hour of the drive, and I'm grateful for the silence. It's been a long day, and I'm trying to

switch my head from the euphoria of being with the Readers Digest editors to suddenly being here, heading towards the unknown.

I've been fascinated with the Navajo teachings since I first met James and have always wanted to visit the Reservation. But this is bigger than that. This is a secret journey so completely different from the corporate world I normally live in. It feels like a powerful force is pulling me into the Navajo world, calling me towards something I still can't see but I know is waiting for me up ahead.

Was I crazy to come? Absolutely. I could be home right now, relaxing from my long week with a glass of wine in my hot tub. But this door opened, and I stepped through it. In fact, I insisted I needed to be here, so no matter what happens, it was my choice.

Maybe the better question I should be asking is, "Am I safe?" I don't know what I'm getting into, and that's scary. But I have a trusted guide, so I shouldn't be worried. Right?

Words: 2,413