

THE REBECCA BRIDE

by

Charlene Tess

CHAPTER ONE

Zeke Milligan was stuck between a rock and a hard place.

Short of telling the truth, he saw no easy way out of the mess he was in. He felt like a lying, cheating sneak every time he left town. He knew it was time to stop punishing Lynn for someone else's sins. Maybe, if she knew the whole story about his past, in time she would understand and forgive him.

It was time to tell her everything. He was not being fair to her; he never had been. He would take a chance, and do whatever he could to win back her trust. Maybe tonight, after the dance, they could have the first honest conversation they had ever shared.

Zeke transferred the paper cup to his left hand and reached with his right into the pocket of his jeans to fish out enough change to pay for the coffee and a blueberry muffin. He had traveled this New Mexico highway from Albuquerque to Timberron so often it had now become routine.

He always stopped at the same Texaco station for gas. The little blonde behind the counter tried to start a conversation, but he just ignored her. Her type never interested him. Too much lipstick; too few brains. Anyway, he always made it a point to say as little as possible to anyone. It was better that way.

The drive back to the cabin soothed his frazzled nerves. Puffy white clouds punctuated the bright blue sky on this beautiful day. The last weekend in May was still cool, and spring had not yet yielded to summer. The last fifteen miles of the trip wound along on a narrow gravel and dirt road through valleys and canyons. His mood improved with each mile as the shiny black Ford pickup climbed each steep incline, and then coasted down the other side.

But it was not the weather or the scenery that made this and every other day a good one for Zeke Milligan, and he knew it. It was who was waiting for him at home. If he lost Lynn, he would lose the best part of his life. He wanted to make sure he did not mess things up this time, like he did before. But that time, he had a good reason. He had been driven to the brink of insanity—no he would not think about it anymore. That chapter was written—the book closed and shelved.

Now, he had to make Lynn understand why he had never told her about his secret life. The life he wished he could forget. Thanks to the private detective he hired, he could finally tell her everything. The whole sordid tale.

He and Lynn first met a little over a year ago: twelve precious months during which he began to trust again in all that was holy and all that was good. Without Lynn in his life, he would never have found the way back from the deep hellhole into which he had fallen.

Today was Memorial Day, and she was probably preparing something to take to the potluck supper at The Lodge. All the holidays were a big deal to her. He felt spoiled by her sentimental remembrance of all the special days during their first year together.

He had to do something to make up for the pain he caused her. The last time they were together, they both said some hurtful things in anger.

The first time he saw her, she was very angry. He dropped by The Sacramento Cafe to have lunch and happened to walk in on the end of a fight. Loud voices came from behind the wall.

“You don’t have a choice!”

“Who says I don’t, little missy? Since when do you tell me what to do? I’m the boss, and don’t you forget it. Hear? Hear me?”

“Sure, I hear you. They probably heard you in El Paso, but yelling at me won’t do you any good. I’m here. I’m staying here, and that’s that. Got it?”

The sound of pots and pans being banged around and the grumbling string of mild oaths brought smiles to all the customers seated in the dining room. Everybody was used to Ed Weeks and his loud voice. He was so hard of hearing, he could not tell that his voice boomed decibels above everyone else’s.

A few moments later, Zeke was surprised by the appearance of the woman who walked out of the kitchen and took an order at the table across the room. She was about half the size he expected her to be. What a brave voice for such a slender, feminine body—and what a wonderful body, indeed.

She wore snug, black slacks and a crisp, white blouse, which lay open at the throat revealing a lovely neck and just a hint of the swell of her breasts. Her perfectly straight cinnamon-colored hair bounced on her shoulders.

Why would a gorgeous young woman like her work as a waitress in this remote mountain village? Almost everyone here was retired, or thinking about it. His thoughts must have been written on his face as she walked over to his table and flipped open her ticket book.

“Are you ready to order?”

“Well, hello. Pop’s got better taste in help than he does in chili.” Zeke’s voice was as deep and resonant as a radio D.J. in the morning. “New around here, aren’t you?”

“Maybe to you, but not to Pop. I’m Lynn Weeks, his daughter.” His use of a cliché annoyed her.

Zeke held out his hand and smiled. “Zeke...Zeke Milligan. I’m happy to know you.”

His smile disarmed her, and as his strong, brown hand briefly gripped hers, she became acutely aware of his virile good looks. In spite of herself, she smiled back, withdrew her hand and fumbled with the ticket book while reaching to remove the menu from the table. “What can I get you today?”

“I was only joking about Pop’s chili. Bring me a bowl of it with some corn bread and a slice of the apple crumb pie.”

“To drink?”

“Coffee, please. Black.”

She brought him a cup and filled it with steaming coffee, but she did not let her eyes meet his. She quickly moved away and refilled cups on the other tables. She was friendly with everyone else, and he felt slighted.

After she placed his food on the table, Zeke was disappointed to see her disappear into the kitchen.

“Tell me about that one, Pop?” Lynn asked as she indicated the dining room with a toss of her head.

“Huh? Who?” Pop yelled.

“Shh! Don’t talk so loud,” she cautioned as she moved closer to her father and gently pushed him toward the door. “Him.” She pointed across the room to the table where Zeke sat eating his chili, and then guided her father back into the kitchen so they could not be seen.

“Oh! Zeke? He’s a regular. Eats here four or five times a week. Kinda’ quiet. Nice guy. Kinda’ strange though. Must have plenty of bucks.”

“Why do you say that?”

“He does a lot of carpentry work over at the Senior Center and won’t take any money for it. Another thing, too; he pays cash for everything and buys stuff all over town.”

“What kind of stuff?”

“All kinds. Hardware. Nails. Lumber.”

“Oooh, sounds sinister to me. Maybe he’s a chain saw murderer.” Lynn smiled mischievously at her father as she whisked the coffee pot off the stove and left the room.

The gruff old man had to laugh at that one as he wiped his hands on his already soiled white apron and continued cutting up the chickens he planned to barbecue for that night’s meal.

She took her time filling up the empty cups at all the other tables before she walked over to where Zeke sat. He had already folded his napkin as if he were finished and ready to leave.

“More coffee?”

“Sure. If you’ll sit down and talk to me for a minute.”

She filled his cup, and then reached across the table to turn another one of the white coffee cups right side up, splashed some of the hot liquid into it and sat down across from him.

As soon as she sat down, she knew she had made a mistake. His six-foot-two inch frame filled the wooden chair, and his long legs extended beneath the table. Their legs touched, and she jumped back as if jolted by electricity. It made both of them uncomfortable and, for a few moments, they sat looking down at the table top instead of at each other while they sipped their coffee. She put sweetener in hers and stirred it before looking up at him.

He was, by her definition, a hunk of a man. His hair was dark brown, thick and wavy. He had a dark, healthy tan, and the lines that were etched around his eyes gave his face character and definition. He looked to be somewhere around thirty. His was not the face nor the body of a boy. A heavy shadow shaded his upper lip and chin, and she was sure he would have to shave more than once a day to keep his face smooth.

He wore a blue, chambray work shirt. Underneath it was a snow-white tee shirt that still had a center crease. It looked like he had just taken it out of the package and put it on. There was something very masculine about a tee shirt on a man. The thought of soft cotton next to a hard body was provocative.

When he raised his cup to his lips and looked at her, he found her staring at him with obvious pleasure. He smiled, and she smiled back, embarrassed at being caught. They both started to speak at the same time.

“Pop—” he began.

“I’m sure—” she interrupted.

“You first,” she insisted as they both laughed.

“Pop talks about you all the time. I’m just surprised to see you working here. He’s always bragging about you and your college education—and your career. Have you given up writing?” Zeke asked.

“Only for a short while. Pop’s waitress quit to have her baby. It left him shorthanded during his busiest season. There are lots of campers out there that don’t pack enough food and end up in here for a hot meal. I told him I’d help out and enjoy the mountains for a while. I don’t get to spend much time here, and it’s one of the most beautiful places I’ve ever been. I’m between assignments right now, and besides, I got lonely for that grouchy old man of mine, so here I am.”

“Those campers have the right idea. I’ve eaten quite a few hot meals in here myself. And you’re right...there is great beauty here.” Zeke’s meaning was clear.

She paused, and then looked directly at him. “And, you, Zeke? What’s your story?”

“Story? What makes you think there’s a story?”

“It’s the writer in me, I guess. I simply meant what are you doing here?”

A lazy smile curved his lips. “Eating dinner.”

“No,” she persisted, “I mean what are your doing in a small town like Timberon?”

“I live here. Do you have a problem with that?” he asked as he laid a twenty-dollar bill on the table.

Lynn smoothed a loose strand of hair behind her ear. *Touchy aren’t we, Mr. Milligan?* For some reason, he did not intend to share his past with her. *And why should he? We have only just met.* Aloud she said, “No problem at all. Just forget I asked. I’ll get your change.”

“Never mind the change. I’ve enjoyed talking with you. Good night, Lynn” he said quietly as he reached for his black cowboy hat and stood to leave.

She tried not to notice how his long, muscular thighs filled out the tight Wrangler jeans as she watched him walk out of the room.

* * *

Lynn pulled her taxi-yellow VW bug off the road and rolled to a stop in front of the only store in town. She adjusted the bill on her baseball cap, popped the seatbelt loose, grabbed her purse and swung her long legs out of the car.

It only took her a few moments to select the video she wanted to rent. She would watch any movie Meryl Streep was in.

She lingered over the stack of used paperback books haphazardly piled in a large wicker basket.

She heard the creak of the screen door and the thud of boots but did not look up until she heard a deep, pleasant voice say, “Jonathan Kellerman’s a good read. Can’t go wrong there.”

Lynn smiled and tilted her head back to look up at him. “Sounds like we have similar tastes in books, Mr. Milligan.

“Maybe,” he said as he stretched out his hand and pulled her to her feet. “What else do you read?”

“Whatever I can find with words on it. You know, magazines, cereal boxes, junk mail.”

He chuckled and squeezed her hand before letting go. “I’ll try not to feel inferior in your presence. I mostly just stick to books.”

She wanted to keep him talking, but he turned toward the freezer and opened the door. Before she could think of a clever retort, he was busy pulling out a carton of ice cream and a frozen pizza.

She took her video and book to the counter, hoping to talk to him again, but he never appeared. She stalled a while outside the door while pretending to read the flyers and business cards posted there, but finally felt like a foolish high school girl waiting by the star quarterback’s hall locker.

Finally, she got in her car and drove away. A check in the rearview mirror all the way down Sacramento Street left her without hope of another encounter. For the rest of the day, all she could think about was how great frozen pizza and ice cream would have gone with her movie.

Zeke drove home slowly. After all, what was the rush anyway? He was used to being alone, but that was not the same as liking it.

He knew he could go to the country-western bar in High Rolls and go dancing or drive all the way to Alamogordo. He could even find a nice looking woman and buy her a drink or two, but he did not feel like dancing or drinking or making small talk. What he felt like, dammit, was getting the law off his back and emerging from the shadows into the sunlight again. It had been almost four years now. Four long and lonely years. He had been so secretive for so long that it had become a part of him, a sad part that he hated increasingly each day.

It had caused him to avoid relationships and hedge on answers to simple, innocent questions like the one Lynn Weeks asked him at the restaurant. He had rudely rejected her attempt to get better acquainted, and then avoided her because an apology without an explanation would have been simply lame.

When he reached the stop sign at the top of the hill, he hesitated for a moment and then turned left, away from home. He drove about four miles out until he saw the turnoff leading to the Fordham Ranch.

Jeff Fordham and his wife Shirine were well known in the community. They ran a successful horse breeding operation. Zeke had heard some of their story from the ladies at the Senior Center. Jeff and Shirine had come together late in life, after many years of painful separation. Zeke liked and respected them both.

He met the attractive couple when they all served on a committee that constructed a little league baseball field. Shirine and Jeff's young son, Chip, worked right alongside the men.

Zeke had heard the scuttlebutt in town about Shirine's past, and he knew she had once hired a private detective from El Paso.

She waved at him as he rolled his pickup to a stop in front of the sprawling ranch house.

"You lost, cowboy?" Shirine teased. She moved closer to the window and put her foot on the running board of the pickup.

"Kind of." He paused. "I was wondering if you would do me a favor?"

Her eyebrows formed a question mark. "Depends. Tell me what you want."

"Just some information."

"You need a horse, Zeke? I didn't know you liked to ride."

"I don't...much. No. I mean, no, I don't need a horse." He wiped his brow with his hand, and then rested it on the steering wheel.

"This is kind of personal, Shirine. I'd rather you didn't say anything about it. Except to Jeff, of course."

"Well, sure. I won't."

"I need to know that detective's name...the one in El Paso."

"He's more than a detective to us, Zeke. He's a good friend. His name is Chico Martinez."

She held out her hand, palm up. "You got a pen and paper? I'll give you his number."

He handed her a small, tattered notebook, and she wrote the phone number down with no questions asked. Zeke liked this woman more every minute.

Chico Martinez hung up the phone and removed his size nine boots from the top of his desk. He stood up and rearranged the stacks of paper on his desk, first moving everything to the left, and then to the right. Then he decided a clean desktop would be best and swept all the papers into the top drawer and slammed it shut. He dusted off his hands and busied himself making fresh coffee.

Chico did not have an office staff, but his answering service took messages. The latest one was from Zeke Milligan, who said he would stop in sometime after lunch. Zeke said Shirine Fordham had supplied this number.

The mention of Shirine Fordham brought a smile to Chico's face that crinkled the laugh lines in his brown skin. He really liked that cute little blonde. Hell, she had become more like family to him.

A few years back, she hired him to figure out who she really was and to find the long lost love of her life, Jeff Fordham. Chico had helped the two of them get back together and piece together the lost twenty years of their lives. He always thought of Shirine as The Van Winkle Bride. It was the most interesting case he had ever investigated, and the story was still the most bizarre because of her twenty-year amnesia. In Washington Irving's story, old Rip had returned to find that everything in his village had changed, and so had Shirine; but she got a second chance at happiness and she grabbed it.

Chico looked in the mirror on the wall and smoothed his hair. It was clipped short in an attempt to tame the thick, black waves. Recently, strands of silver had appeared and intensified the wiry texture.

After he polished off nearly a whole package of tortilla chips and a jar of salsa, he checked his pencil-thin mustache for crumbs that might have lodged there. So much for his cholesterol control plan. Oh well, he would start again tomorrow.

Zeke's knock coincided with the cuckoo clock on the wall as it sounded off twice. Chico liked the other man's firm handshake. Zeke declined, so Chico poured only himself a cup of fresh coffee and watched as Zeke folded his lanky body into the wing-backed chair.

"So," Chico said, "tell me how the Fordhams are doing."

"They're good. Their ranch is developing quite a favorable reputation."

"Glad to hear it." He took a gulp of coffee. "You into ranching?"

Zeke did not answer right away. He looked toward the window, and then down at the cup in front of Chico. When he spoke, his voice was low. "In a manner of speaking."

What the hell does that mean? Chico waited for Zeke to continue. An uncomfortable silence filled the room, and then Zeke cleared his throat and began.

"I need to hire an investigator, and I need to be sure that what I say doesn't leave this room."

Chico's mustache slanted upward as he drew in a deep breath, and then blew it out.

"Well, you've come to the right place, Mr. Milligan. I'm pretty good at zipping my lips if people put me on their payroll." He stood up, refilled his cup, and then sat back down. "What exactly do you want me to do? Are you in trouble?"

"The sheriff thinks I murdered my ex-wife."

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