

THE VAN WINKLE BRIDE

by

Charlene Tess

“Sure enough! It is Rip Van Winkle -- it is himself! Why, where have you been these twenty long years?”

“God knows,” exclaimed he, at his wit’s end; “I’m not myself—I’m somebody else... I was myself last night, but I fell asleep on the mountain and—everything’s changed, and I’m changed, and I can’t tell what’s my name, or who I am!”

—Washington Irving

The Van Winkle Bride

PART ONE

Oceanside, California

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Chapter One

Shirine McVey's eyes adjusted slowly to the morning sun. She stretched and reached for her cigarettes on the nightstand. The *Marlboros* were not there, but there were other things. Things that did not belong to her. Things she had never seen before. A gold watch, obviously expensive; a glass of what looked and smelled like watered-down Rum and *Coke*, and a small, lizard purse.

She sat up and pushed back the covers, then squinted against the brightness that streamed in the windows and rubbed the sleep from her eyes. Her vision was blurred, and it took a few moments before she could see clearly.

What's going on? She scanned the room and became even more apprehensive. This was not the room she rented last night. Nothing about it was the same. She remembered two double beds with turquoise chenille spreads; a small, round table and two chairs; a TV encased in black plastic, and a chain lock and two deadbolts on the door that lead to the hallway.

This morning's room, however, held a beautiful, teakwood bed and dresser; plants, pottery, a light blue sofa and a matching chair. There were two doors, both closed, and one whole wall was paneled in oak.

Where was her suitcase, and where were the blue jeans and purple blouse she

wore on the bus ride from Fort Worth to El Paso? There was nothing of hers in the room at all.

This is crazy!

She bounded from the bed. Maybe, if she brushed her teeth and washed her face, she would be able to make sense out of what had become a very

bewildering situation.

She pushed open the first of the two heavy oak doors and discovered the bathroom. Her eyes widened in surprise when she saw the marble sink top and gold fixtures. The matching hot tub was decorated with mirrors and waxy green plants. Thick peach-colored towels were neatly folded in a brass towel rack; and bowls of ornately carved soap, bath oil beads and bottles of skin lotion sat on the rim of the tub. Cosmetics were neatly arrayed on a mirror tray beside an electric toothbrush and hair dryer.

More frightened and confused now than before, Shirine rushed back into the bedroom and searched under the bed for her clothes; her suitcase; any familiar object. She found nothing. Her wide, panicked gaze searched frantically for a telephone to call the motel office. There was no phone.

She moved to the window and, with a shaky hand, pulled back the drapes. The morning sun bathed the room in a blinding light that assaulted her senses. The view that met her gaze was *not* the same one that greeted her the night before. Last night, the brownish-green earth of the desert sloped up toward a huge mountain that sat outside her window to the north. Last night, the absence of trees and the abundance of cacti and sagebrush on the granite outcrop had been dispiriting. Last night, cardboard and adobe shacks dotted the far bank of the Rio Grande, in Juarez, Mexico.

This morning, from this room, the view was breathtaking. Large mounds of white sand were dotted with black lava rock and folded in a picture perfect pattern down an incline to the beautiful blue-green ocean, which rolled and pitched with white-capped waves.

Shirine saw nothing familiar below. No parking lot, no street, no cars—no mountain. How could there be no mountain? Her scalp prickled with an eerie sense of dread, and a fine mist of perspiration covered her upper lip.

Her mouth was suddenly too dry to swallow.

Oh, my God! Where am I? What is happening!

Shirine ignored the fact that she was clothed in only a thin pink negligee and ran to the door. She had to find a maid or a bellboy – anyone – to help her.

The door was locked.

She twisted the knob, pulled at it with all her might, but the door refused to open. She ran to the next door. It opened easily to reveal a closet the size of her bedroom back home. Orderly rows of dresses, suits, skirts, blouses, coats, pants and robes were arranged by color. A high shelf traversed the interior of the closet and held dozens of pairs of pumps, heels, flats and sandals in every color of the rainbow. There were also boots: dress boots, casual boots, western boots and hiking boots.

One pair, in particular, caught her eye. They were made of soft lizard skin, dyed to a beautiful shade of light plum. She reached to pull them down from the shelf and slipped them on. They were a perfect fit.

That's it. I am losing it completely!

Shirine sank down on the floor inside the closet, held her head in her hands and forced herself to breathe deeply.

Think, Shirine. Think carefully. Where are you supposed to be? There has to be a logical explanation for all of this. Last night I was at my engagement party. Jeff and all of his friends were there. We were drinking beer and eating tacos. We laughed so hard we cried. I was wearing my jeans and boots, and Jeff and I were telling everyone about the honeymoon we had planned.

No one could believe that they were going to ride horses into the mountains and backpack for five days.

Mountains. She loved the mountains.

Shirine forced herself to get up, to return to the window, to assure herself that the mountain she saw from her window the night before was really gone. Had her mind gone with it? Was she crazy? Hallucinating? Or had she simply celebrated a little too hard last night?

Too much beer? Could that explain it? Maybe she got drunk, and Jeff was playing a joke on her.

No. Jeff would not do that, and she never got drunk. Jeff would never be so cruel as to allow her to wake up alone in a strange room in a strange place. He was simply not the type, and he loved her too much.

Where was Jeff? Whose clothes were in the closet? Where was the motel room she checked into last night? In only a week, Jeff's job would be finished. They would go to the courthouse, get married, then take off for five wonderful days and start their life together as Mr. and Mrs. Jefferson Fordham.

Jeff had already found a rancher, who was eager to have him run his breeding operation. He had some wonderful ideas that would improve an already fine herd of quarter horses. His years in college were not nearly as valuable, however, as the practical experience he gained from working on his uncle's ranch in West Texas.

Someday, she and Jeff would own a ranch of their own in New Mexico, and she would help him with the horses. In the meantime, they would live in a small cabin in the mountains they both loved so much. She had already found a job at a small greenhouse nearby. She loved plants, and the job would allow her to work outdoors in the fresh air.

Last night, her entire future had been planned, orderly, a joy to think about. This morning, however, she had no sense of order, just panic.

Shirine began to talk, to let her own words convince her that she had not gone insane. “Jeff,” she sobbed. “Where the hell are you? I need you. I wasn’t afraid to make the long bus trip from Fort Worth to El Paso alone. I wasn’t afraid to spend a week here while you finished up in Marfa, but I *am* afraid to spend the night alone in a place I’ve never seen, with things that aren’t mine. I need help! I need *you*!”

Shirine finally gave way to the tears that burned her eyes; frustrated, angry, terror-born tears. She sobbed until her eyelids were swollen and her throat was raw—and she needed a cigarette. She searched like a woman possessed for the pack of *Marlboros*. The purse and bedside table drawer were both empty. She had to dress and get the hell out of that room. She had to find some answers.

She went back to the closet and pulled out a pair of soft camel-color slacks. The Liz Claiborne label revealed that they were expensive – and a size ten, two steps up from her usual size six. She grabbed a blouse from the closet also, then moved to the dresser and found a pair of beige panties in the top drawer. She bypassed the brassieres, which were much too large.

She slipped on the panties and stepped into the slacks. Her brow furrowed in confusion when she found that they did not slide on easily.

What in the hell is this? She zipped and buttoned the pants. They were a perfect, snug fit. *Size ten? Me? No way. I’ve never worn anything bigger than a six in my life!*

She slid one arm into the blouse and buttoned it up, then turned to face the mirror attached to the bureau. Her eyes widened in amazement—and horror. Her breasts were fuller; her skin was pale and white. She approached the mirror and examined herself more closely. Her gaze widened further.

Wide green eyes stared into the mirror at a woman she did not

recognize. This woman had shoulder-length red hair and was older, mature, even matronly looking. Her pale skin was smeared with cosmetics. Mascara smudged her eyes and faded lipstick outlined her mouth.

She rushed into the bathroom and snatched up a small ball of rose-carved soap. She scrubbed her face, splashed it with cold water and rubbed the skin vigorously with a soft towel. Beneath the makeup, the wrinkles remained—small crinkly lines that radiated from her eyes and mouth.

She looked thirty. No. Older.

Her fingers traced the lines at the corners of her eyes, but paused when a diamond solitaire, much larger than the engagement ring Jeff gave her, was reflected in the bathroom mirror. Even more confusing was the matching wedding band.

A loud, piercing scream filled the air, and the last thing Shirine saw before she hit the floor was the wide-eyed look of terror reflected in that strange woman's eyes.

Shirine opened her eyes. A wracking cough shook her body as she was lifted from the bathroom floor and helped back to the bed by a gray-haired woman in a black dress and white, frilly organdy apron.

“Here, now, madam. This will never do. Lie down, and I’ll get you one of your pills,” the maid cooed as she reached into her pocket and took out a small bottle. She crossed to the bathroom and filled a cup with water, then hurried back to the bed.

Confused and weak, Shirine allowed the other woman to lift her head, and she swallowed the white pill without argument. She sank slowly back onto the pillows and tried to focus her eyes on the ornate ceiling as the maid straightened the covers and closed the drapes. Shirine lay motionless as the

attendant's gentle hands helped her undress and slip into a soft, pink dressing gown.

Who is she? What is happening to me? were her last thoughts as she drifted into an insensible state somewhere between sleep and wakefulness.

Darkness had filled the bedroom the next time Shirine awoke from fitful slumber. The door opened, and the same woman entered with a cloth-covered silver tray. She placed it on the table in the corner and arranged a fork, knife and spoon on a linen napkin. "Would you like to sit here and eat, or would you rather be served in bed?"

Shirine stared at the woman with a blank expression. "Who are you? And what hotel is this?"

"Hotel?" The maid looked at her with a gentle smile. "Yes, I guess it does feel that way to you at times, doesn't it?" She helped Shirine from the bed and over to the table. "Here. Sit down and eat now before it gets cold. The veal is just the way you like it."

Shirine chewed a small slice of the tender steak, which tasted even better than it smelled. She had not realized how hungry she was. After a few bites, she turned to watch the maid strip the soiled sheets from the bed and replace them with clean ones. "What's your name?"

"My name? Now, madam, you know my name is Margie." She shook her gray head in concern. "I think you need to rest after your dinner. You are even more upset than usual tonight."

"You must be in the wrong room, Margie. I've never seen you before in my life." She crumpled her napkin in a sudden show of frustration and threw it down on the small table. "No. I'm the one who's in the wrong room. What hotel is this? I demand to know!"

“You’re not in a hotel, Mrs. Stowe. This is your home. You’re in your bedroom, just like you always are at this time of day. You know that.” Her voice was soothing and patient. “Now, you have to eat and give the medication time to take effect.”

Shirine stood on shaky legs, then walked to the bathroom and closed the door behind her. *Mrs. Stowe? Not a hotel? What in the hell is going on?*

She washed her hands, and once again, the slightly familiar, but older face stared back at her from the medicine cabinet mirror. Only her wide emerald eyes, now wild with fear, looked the same. *But my hair should be blond. My face should be young, almost childlike, and where are the freckles Jeff always teased me about?*

Jeff! I have to find Jeff!

Shirine rushed back to the bedroom. A stack of magazines and newspapers lay on the freshly made bed, and a glass of water sat on the bedside table. The tray of food was gone, and so was Margie. The February issue of *Redbook* lay on top of the stack.

February? She reached for the newspaper, and her eyes widened in horror when she read the masthead. *The Los Angeles Times, February 4, 1995.*

How can that be? I went to sleep in that hotel room in Texas in 1976!

Shirine rushed to the door. It was locked, just as before. She hammered on the heavy oak portal with her fists. “Margie! Margie, I have to talk to you! Let me out of here! Somebody, let me out of here!”

She pounded. She yelled. She pounded some more. Suddenly the door swung inward, and she brushed past the strange man who stood there and ran out into the hall. She took only a few steps, however, before strong hands gripped her upper arms and shoved her back into the bedroom. The stranger

pushed her down into a chair, then closed and locked the door.

Shirine stared at the man who stood before her. He was tall, thin and completely bald. His dark, bushy eyebrows and nearly colorless blue eyes seemed to look right through her. She had never seen him before.

“Really, Shirine, you have to calm yourself. If you need something, push the servants’ bell and tell them what you want. There is no need to bang on the door and raise such a fuss.” His deep voice was laced with exasperation and worry. “Margie told me that you seemed to be getting worse, but I didn’t know how much so until now. She said she found you on the bathroom floor this morning.” He shook his bald head in aggravation. “Tell me where you got the liquor. I have forbidden the servants to give you anything alcoholic under any circumstances.”

“Liquor? What liquor? I don’t have any idea what you’re talking about! I don’t even know who you are!” Tears flooded Shirine’s eyes. “I’m not even sure how I got here, and I resent being locked up in a strange room. Now, let me out of here so I can find Jeff!”

“Jeff?” he spoke harshly. “Who’s *Jeff*?”

“Jeff Fordham, my fiancé!”

His chest shook with laughter, an abrasive laugh that did not reach his eyes. He reached down and cupped his hand under her elbow, then directed her to the bed. “You must still be intoxicated, my dear. When you drink, you have these ridiculous notions about other men. I am well aware of the fact that middle-aged women need to believe younger men are still attracted to them. Some even dream about young lovers, but they usually are not stupid enough to verbalize such fantasies - especially to their husbands.”

“Husband?” she choked. She shook her head vehemently. “No. I’m *not* married, and most certainly not to you. I’m Shirine McVey. I am single,

twenty years old, and very much in love with a beautiful man!” She sank down onto the bed and sobbed into her hands, not caring that he watched. She had reached the depth of despair from which no amount of reason could reach her.

His manner softened at the sight of her tears and he sat on the bed beside her. He stroked her hair, her neck. “Shirine. My dear Shirine.” He shook his head slowly. “How it grieves me to see you cry. I’ve tried to be patient with you; to let you have your moments of secret delight with the fictitious man of your dreams, both waking and sleeping, but lately it’s just been too much for me. Do you think I *like* hearing you talk about another man? One you call beautiful? I’ve been your husband for almost twenty years, and I have loved you dearly. I know you’ve never felt any great passion for me, but we’ve had a good life. God knows, I’ve tried to give you everything you could ever want or need.”

Shirine’s eyes widened throughout his diatribe. *This can’t be happening! I can’t have been married to this man for twenty years!* She swallowed convulsively, then dried her tears on the pillowcase and met his gaze. “Look, I am not your wife. When I went to sleep last night, I was in Texas in the year 1976. I don’t know where I am, or why I’m here, and I am terribly frightened...”

“Frightened? Of me?” He shook his head again. “That’s impossible. I’m the one you’ve always turned to when you have those terrible dreams. I’m the one who has always helped you sort out your disordered thoughts and get back to the real world. Come now, dear, get your slippers on and let’s go downstairs for a while. I know I’ve been gone most of the week, but I’m home now. There’s no need for you to stay up here alone. I’ll take care of you.” His tone was kinder now; no trace of anger remained

Without a word, Shirine put on the slippers that he held in his hand and allowed herself to be led from the bedroom. They walked down a long, thickly carpeted hallway, descended a flight of curving stairs and entered a beautiful, oak-paneled room where logs blazed in a marble fireplace.

Shirine held out her hands to the warmth. Several pictures in gold frames sat on the mantle above. She stepped closer to get a better look and stifled a cry of alarm when the two people in the first photo stared back at her. The blue-eyed, balding man, who stood on the deck of a cruise ship, was clearly the same man who stood behind her. Next to him, dressed in a beautiful designer suit and wide-brimmed hat, stood the redheaded woman she saw in the mirror.

“When was this picture taken?” she breathed her horror.

He crossed the room to stand beside her and took the picture from her hands. “This, my dear, was taken on *The Princess Caroline* just two years ago when we went on our anniversary cruise. And this,” he reached for another photograph on the mantle, “was taken on our wedding day in 1976, in front of the courthouse in San Francisco. You were beautiful, even then.” His pale eyes misted with emotion.

Shirine’s hand trembled as she took the larger photograph from him and studied it closely. There he was, only he had hair then. It was thin and receding, but he looked so much better with hair. The woman in the photo was a younger version of the woman she had seen in the mirror. Her face was unlined, and she looked at least twenty pounds thinner. A blaze of short-cropped red hair peeked out from under her white hat. She wore sunglasses and a beautiful white silk suit and matching shoes. A red rose corsage completed the effect.

“Why was I wearing sun glasses in my wedding pictures? Did we get

married outdoors?” she asked as the truth of the situation began to sink in.

“Of course not, dear. We were married in Judge Waxton’s chambers. You wore the dark glasses because your eyes were still sensitive to the sun after your surgery. We asked the judge to take our picture on the front steps of the courthouse. Don’t you remember?”

My eyes? Surgery? There’s nothing wrong with my eyes!

The thoughts tumbled one over the other in her brain and suddenly she could not think about it any longer. Not for a while. She turned to face him. “I’m really very tired, and I’m just not myself tonight. May I please go back to my room and rest? I have so many questions, but I can’t decide where to start.”

“Of course. Come.” He extended his arm and she accepted it, however hesitantly, and he led her back upstairs. He paused when they reached the bedroom and leaned down to kiss her.

She turned her face away. “Please don’t,” she whispered. “I don’t even know your first name.

He straightened as if she had just slapped him. “It’s Walter. Walter Stowe.”

His voice had an edge to it now, which had not been there before. He backed out of the room then, and yanked the door closed. The key turned in the lock, but Shirine was too tired, too confused and too bewildered to care.

She turned back the covers on the bed and eased herself down onto the mattress, then instantly fell asleep.

Thanks for reading.

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