

TROUBLED WATER

LONE STAR LOVE BOOK ONE



VICTORIA PHELPS

BLUSHING BOOKS

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CHAPTER 1



MEGAN

“*J*aysus, Mary, and Joseph,” Megan muttered under her breath. She grasped the safety strap and held on with all her might. She would not fly across the coach and land in the lap of that leering man across the aisle. She would not. If he’d taken his eyes off her bosom even once the entire trip, she was a leprechaun. The stagecoach lurched to a shuddering stop, and Megan relaxed into the seat.

The door flew open and the driver’s wrinkled, sun baked face appeared. “San Miguel, folks.” He pulled a large red handkerchief from his pocket and swiped at the dust coating his face. “Who’s getting off?”

“Me, sir.” Megan scooted to the edge of the cushion and accepted the offer of his big hand. Once her feet were secure on the packed dirt she paused, waiting for her trembling legs to remember their purpose. Five days on the train from Boston and two bouncing, jolting, teeth rattling days on the stage left her frazzled, frizzy, and tired to the bone.

“You all right, miss?” The driver placed a protective hand under her elbow.

“Thank you, sir. You’ve been an angel.” Megan looked hopefully up the street. “If my fiancé were here, he’d thank you proper like, but he didn’t know I was arrivin’ today.”

The driver retrieved her bag and dropped it at her feet. He pointed across the street at a green and white two-story building “That’s the hotel if you need a place to stay.” He gave her an assessing glance. “Will you be all right?”

“Oh, yes. Don’t worry about me. My fiancé will come for me. I’ll stay here until I can get word to him that I’ve arrived.” She attempted to restrain her corkscrew curls, but as soon as she captured one another broke free. When she couldn’t subdue the riot on her head, she heaved a sigh and dropped her hands to her sides in defeat.

“Are you done fawning over the girl? I need to be in Fremont by nightfall.” The man with the wandering eye leaned from the coach. His voice a blend of impatience and insult. His eyes glued once more to her chest.

The driver turned to the stage, eyebrows raised and hands on hips. “Hold your horses, mister. We’ll get there.” Giving Megan a shrug and half a smile, he swung into the driver’s seat, took hold of the reins and gave them a snap. The coach departed leaving a choking cloud of dust swirling in its wake.

Megan gasped and coughed and tried to swallow. Her throat coated with grime.

She blinked away a tear. The green hills and crashing ocean of County Galway were far and away from here. She’d never see them again. Of that she was certain. Her ma and da were gone. Her brother off finding his fortune. Her uncle a scheming wretch who worshiped money and would have sold her to the highest bidder. Well, no use thinking of him or that man. She shuddered in spite of the heat that rolled in wavy lines off the street.

She was here now. Texas. Hot, dry, foreign. Better make the best of it.

Squaring her small shoulders, she picked up her bag and trudged toward the hotel.

"Excuse me, miss." A tall man with a badge hanging from his plaid shirt stepped into her path.

"Sheriff Ford. Ethan Ford. I try to meet the stage every afternoon. It's my job to know who comes and goes from town. I was held up for a minute. Mind telling me your name and your business in San Miguel?" He waited.

Even though the big man had asked a question, it was, in fact, a demand. He wore authority like a favorite coat.

The sheriff stood with his legs braced apart and thumbs hooked in his belt loops. He reached up with one hand and tipped his hat farther back on his head and pinned her to the ground with his calm, waiting gaze.

"Certainly, sir. My name is Megan O'Shanahan. I'm here to be married. Married to Michael Manning. He sent for me, and I've come all the way from Boston. I hoped he would meet me, but then he had no way to know I would arrive today." She stepped back to get a better look at the man.

"Mike Manning. You sure? He didn't mention it to me, and I'm a friend of his." Surprise radiated from him like heat.

"Of course I'm sure. Would I have spent five days on a train and two on that blessed coach if I wasn't?" Megan was hungry and so tired she could hardly think, but she did know Michael Manning had sent her a ticket and money to make the journey. This man's doubting words felt like a blow.

"Okay. Okay. Calm down. You took me by surprise is all." The sheriff scanned up and down the street before speaking. He pointed at the hotel. "I heard Jim tell you this was the hotel, but that name's a mite fancy for the truth. It's really more of a boarding house with five rooms all of which are occupied." He gave her another

assessing stare. "Tell you what. I'll rent a buggy, and we'll pick up the preacher."

Megan startled. "The preacher?" She squeaked.

"Well, you did say you came to marry Mike. I'm assuming you're a mail order bride." He waited until she nodded her head. "Mike lives alone on the ranch. His foreman and his wife, Manuel and Lupe, have a house nearby. Now, I can't leave you alone with an unmarried man. The old biddies of this town would have a field day with that. It ain't proper."

"Maybe I can stay with the foreman and his wife?" Megan ventured.

"No, staying with the hired help wouldn't be much better for your reputation." He rubbed a large hand over his face. "You must be hungry. Let's go to my office. You can freshen up, and I'll take you to the café for a meal. While you're eating, I'll get the buggy and the preacher." He placed his hat squarely on his head. "If there's been a mistake, I'll find a family to take you in for a night or two." He clapped his hands together in satisfaction as if to say 'problem solved, girl from stagecoach neatly handled.

"I have to admit I'll be mighty interested in Mike's reaction. He's not usually one to keep secrets." He chuckled and clapped his hands together one more time. "This way." The sheriff strode off down the street. Megan ran to keep up until he noticed her distress. "Sorry." He cut his pace in two.

She was hungry, dusty, tired, and a little frightened. What if Michael didn't want her? But, then, he wouldn't have sent the ticket and the money. That sheriff had given her a scare, but he had to be wrong. She had nowhere else to go. No one else to go to.

The sheriff escorted her to the café and settled her at a table with a blue flowered cloth. "Molly," he called, "this is Megan O'Shanahan. She came on today's stage. Would you fix her a meal? I'll be back in a bit."

"Hello, Megan. The special is fried chicken, mashed potatoes, carrots and pie. How does that sound?"

“Sounds like heaven.” She reached down to smooth her skirt and shook her head in disgust. It was hopelessly rumpled and clouds of dust would fill the air if she gave the material a shake. Well, there was no hope for it.

A plate of food was placed before her. Megan’s mouth watered at the sight.

“Coffee?” The woman asked.

“Please.” Megan unfolded her napkin and laid it over her lap, said a brief prayer and picked up her knife and fork. The restorative power of a hot meal spread through her body and the knot that occupied her stomach loosened.

It would work out. She couldn’t go back. The thought of her uncle and the memory of that man brought a rush of anger. She squeezed her eyes shut and pressed her lips tightly together, but the image floated darkly behind her lids. Megan lifted her shoulders in a tiny shrug. No use thinking of all that she left broken in her wake. She must move forward.

“Ready to go?” Sheriff Ford had returned with another man who wore a minister’s collar. “Megan, this is Fred Miller. He’s the preacher here in town. Fred, this is Megan O’Shanahan.”

“Ethan tells me you came all this way to marry Mike Manning. He’s a good man.” The preacher sat in a chair across the table. “Are you Catholic?” His voice was calm, reassuring.

“Yes, Father.” Megan replied.

“I’m a simple preacher, Megan. There isn’t a priest in San Miguel although you could go to Abilene. I am happy to perform the ceremony if you are comfortable with the idea.” He waited in that unhurried way men of the cloth seem to possess.

“Yes, sir.” She stood and returned her napkin to the table. Ma and Da would be rolling in their graves for certain sure. Not married by a priest, but Megan was alone and must do as she must. The minister’s words were reassuring. Michael Manning was a good man. A little puff of relief escaped from between her trembling lips.

Sheriff Ford clapped his hands again, and she jumped. Mercy. The man liked to do that. "Let's go, folks. Daylight's wasting." He motioned Megan toward the door and handed her into the buggy waiting outside.

The buggy rolled out of town drawing curious gazes as it passed. Well, Megan thought, a young woman traveling alone was rare to be sure. One leaving town with both the sheriff and the preacher a stranger sight yet.

Like your tongue poking at a sore tooth, she worried over the sheriff's words. Michael had not spoken of her. But, he sent the ticket. He sent the money. He sent the ticket. He sent the money. The words became a chant she whispered to the revolution of the wheels. He sent the ticket. He sent the money.