

TREASURED

LONESTAR LOVE, BOOK TWO



VICTORIA PHELPS

BLUSHING BOOKS

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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

CHAPTER 1



CHARLOTTE

“*M*erciful heavens,” Charlotte groaned. She lifted her bottom from the seat and gave it a surreptitious rub as the stagecoach lumbered to a shaking, shuddering, bone-cracking stop.

The door sprang open and a calloused, dusty hand thrust through the opening was followed by an equally grimy, weathered face. “Need a hand?”

Her white hand disappeared into his mighty paw. With a single jerk, she was propelled through the coach door and onto baked Texas dirt. The frantic flapping of bird wings inside her chest heralded rising panic. She took a deep breath and felt a slight slowing, a minute lessening of the pressure mounting next to her heart. Five days on a chugging, smoke-belching train followed by two on this transportation torture device left her with shattered nerves.

“Thank you, sir.” Charlotte retrieved her hand and wiped it on the side of her skirt.

“You’re welcome, missy.” The man scrambled to the top of the coach, snapped the reins and disappeared in a cloud of dust leaving Charlotte alone in a dirty street with her single bag at her feet.

Memories of Boston’s cobbled streets and sea-misted breeze floated like a mirage across her mind. Well, Texas would not be cool, or cobbled, or civilized, but she had a mission, and it started with a visit to her friend.

Charlotte peered up and down the dusty street. Buildings lined either side with signs proclaiming their purpose: Mercantile, Doctor, Dress Maker, Livery, Sheriff, Café, and a board with bright red letters hanging over a swinging door read Saloon. But these obvious signs of industry were contradicted by the absence of people.

Tears hovered, but she blinked them back. She had come so far on her own; the only choice was to continue forward. Forward away from her old life. Her life of lies.

A man emerged from the shadow of a building. Her inhale was a gasp. She and Cook had devoured every dime novel smuggled into her father’s stuffy Boston manor, and the man who approached stepped directly from its pages: tall, muscled, long legs disappearing into cowboy boots. His tanned face topped by a large hat set firmly on light brown hair. Hair that brushed his collar —hair unfashionably long. Men in Boston dressed for effect. Hats for show not function. Hair trimmed. Clothes an advertisement of wealth. Charlotte knew at the deepest pit of understanding that this man did not posture, did not care for fashion, did not judge a man by his bank account. A race of startling fire ran along her limbs and settled, unknown and confusing, between her thighs. This man was purpose, action, authority. She shivered.

He moved with determination now. Long legs eating the distance between them. His hand shot forward. “I’m Sheriff Ethan Ford.” He paused. His hand hung suspended in the space between them. “I like to meet the stage. It’s my job to know who’s coming and going from town.”

She felt his eyes travel her body, lingering on her too large bosom, her generous hips. She placed her hand in his. "I'm Charlotte Weaver, a friend of Megan O'Shanahan. Well, I guess she is Megan Manning now. Do you know her?"

"She's my best friend's wife," Ethan declared. "Are they expecting you?"

"Yes and no. They invited me to visit, but I didn't tell them when I would arrive." Charlotte cast anxious looks up and down the street. She was tired and frightened. She'd rarely been allowed to leave her father's Boston home and never by herself, but here she stood in a hot Texas town talking, unchaperoned, with a man not of her acquaintance. If she could just find Megan, she would be all right. "Do you know how I might get to their ranch?"

"Mike and Megan are having a big party today, and most everybody is already there. The foreman and his wife are leaving, going back to Mexico," he told her. "I planned to head out there myself as soon as I met the stage. I could take you with me." With a long finger, he tilted his hat back on his head and observed her with cool green eyes.

She pursed her mouth, thinking, considering. The trip on the train had been harrowing. The coach an ordeal of endurance. Riding off with a man, alone? She could barely breathe at the audacity of it.

"There is a little problem." He shuffled his feet and gazed into the distance over her left shoulder.

"Oh?" The entire idea was a problem. She peered up at the big man's face.

"The Livery is closed because Arnie is already at the party. I can't rent a buggy. I'm riding my horse." He motioned at the big palomino tied to the hitching post. "You'd have to ride double with me on Charlie."

A cold finger of fear ran down her spine. She drew a shaky, raspy breath. She'd never been alone with a man, never been allowed.

“Oh.” Her eyes popped wide. She gave the horse serious perusal. “I don’t know how to ride. I’ve lived in Boston all my life. It doesn’t seem quite,” she hesitated before finishing her thought, “proper.”

Ethan studied her drawn brows. Her dark brown eyes darted up and down the street as if in search of rescue. “Miss Weaver, you can trust me. I am the sheriff of this town, and my job is to protect its citizens, not harm them. I will see you safely to the Circle M. Now, you don’t have to know how to ride. You will sit safely in my lap. That’s all.”

He swallowed so hard she saw his Adam’s apple slide down the thick column of his throat.

“We’ll leave your bag in my office. Mike can send a hand to pick it up tomorrow.” He shifted his feet and waited.

Charlotte scanned the street once more. Riding alone with a man, sitting on his lap, would bring certain ruin in Boston. She would be barred from the finest homes, not that her father allowed her to go to any of them, but still, her reputation would be destroyed.

Life in the west must be different. He didn’t seem to be offering ruin or trying to trick his way into her father’s fortune. He would take her to Megan. A place she desperately wanted to be. She chanced one more quick glance at his granite jaw. “All right, sheriff. Thank you.”

The sheriff clapped his hands and gave her a reassuring grin. “Wait here. I’ll lock your bag up.”

Not waiting to see if she followed his instructions, he gathered the bag and set off down the street. He was used to obedience. The man wore authority like a favorite coat, comfortable and casual.

Her father always made her decisions, but she must form her own opinions now. She trusted him, and the decision rested easy. His long legs brought him back to where she still stood, alone and a stranger, in the middle of the street.

Ethan motioned at the wooden walkway. “The easiest way, I

believe, is if you climb up the stairs. I'll mount Charlie, bring him over, and scoop you up."

Charlotte looked down at her bountiful proportions. "I'm a little big for scooping." She felt the blush rising in her face.

"Nonsense. Trust me." The sheriff's words brought reassurance.

She climbed the stairs to the walkway and waited.

"Move to the edge." She did as she was told and the sheriff nodded his approval. "That's it." His long arm shot out and circled her waist. He lifted her. Lifted her easily. Lifted her without a groan. Lifted her onto his legs and bounced first one and then the other until her bottom fell securely between his hard thighs. He placed one arm on either side of her body and took up the reins. "Ready?"

"Ready," she replied although her small, shaky voice signaled otherwise.

"Just lean back and rest against my chest."

She obeyed. She had made dramatic, gigantic, terrifying decisions in the last few weeks. More choices than she'd made in her entire life. Handing responsibility over to this capable man was a relief. She let herself sink into his arms, and into an exhausted sleep.

She resurfaced with a jerk. "I'm sorry, Sheriff Ford. I'm so tired. It was a long trip from Boston."

"Call me Ethan," he snorted. "I'd say we're past formalities."

"Thank you, sh—er... Ethan. You may call me Charlotte." She lifted her head from his shoulder and surveyed the land.

They navigated a big bend in the road, and Ethan motioned toward a white house with a big porch. "That's Mike and Megan's house."

Riding around the corner of the barn and into the yard, they entered a whirling hub of activity. Tables set on sawhorses groaned with food. A little stage occupied the far corner and abandoned instruments whispered of music and dancing later. Behind the

barn, a ball game was in full swing—the outfield littered with children of all sizes.

A man strode across the yard calling out as he walked. “Thank God you’re here, Ethan. Tom and John are both on the other team, and they’re killing us.” Ethan moved the horse from the shadow of the barn, and the man’s mouth dropped open. He snapped it shut with an audible click, pulled his hat from his head, and peered up at the woman sitting in Ethan’s lap. “Sorry, ma’am, I didn’t see you at first.” He speared the sheriff with a questioning look. “Well, who might this lovely lady be?”

“This is Charlotte Weaver. She arrived on today’s stage. Charlotte, this is Mike.”

Mike reached up to help her dismount. Ethan paused. He hated to let go. His arm tightened around Charlotte’s middle. He added a small squeeze before he lifted her into Mike’s waiting hands.

Her feet planted on firm earth once more, Charlotte examined the man before her. “You must be Megan’s husband.”

He stepped closer and took her hand in both of his. “We were wondering if you would come. Megan will be mighty happy.” The man grinned ear-to-ear.

A shriek split the afternoon air. “Charlotte. Charlotte.” A small, heavily-pregnant woman pushed herself to the edge of her seat and with a mighty heave managed to become upright. Holding the stair railing, she put one foot down before setting the other next to it. Once she navigated the stairs, she put her hand to her back and hurried toward the little group.

Mike frowned a thunderstorm. “Megan, you just stop right there.” His voice a lightning strike. He sped to his wife’s side and threw a supportive arm around her. “Marcie told you to sit and stay quiet. If you can’t do that, I’m going to put you to bed.”

“Oh, Michael, please don’t scold. It’s Charlotte.” Tears trailed down her freckled cheeks.

Charlotte rushed to Megan’s side. “Look at you. I didn’t know you were anticipating a blessed event.”

“Lord, Charlotte, no one talks like that here. We’re more likely to call a spade a spade.” She glanced at her husband. “I’m eight months pregnant. I’m small. The baby’s big. Marcie, my midwife, said I need to be in bed until the birth. The longer I stay pregnant the better it will be. But today is the party for Lupe and Manuel. I couldn’t stay in bed today, but,” she cast apologetic eyes at her husband and went on, “I am supposed to stay on the porch.”

Mike escorted his wife to the safety of the swing.

Megan collapsed in a pool of calico. Her stomach rose before her in a giant mound, a ship in full sail. She leaned back and laid her hand on the swell beneath her shirt. “When did you get here, Charlotte? Can you stay? Are you hungry?” She seized her friend’s hand and squeezed.

Charlotte laughed. “I arrived on the stage from Abilene. The sheriff was kind enough to bring me here. I can stay for a while. I am hungry, and thirsty, and dusty from travel.” Her eyes traveled to Megan’s belly. “But, how are you?”

“Big as a house,” she said, and looked up at her husband. “Excited. A little scared.”

Mike shifted his feet and put his hands on slim hips. “Marcie said you would be fine,” he said, but flights of fear moved over his handsome features.

A dark-haired woman in a swirl of brilliant color turned from the food and walked toward them. Her smile turned to concern. “Are you all right, mi amiga? Do you want to go lie down?”

“No, I don’t want to lie down. Goodness. All I do is lie down. I wouldn’t miss your party for anything.” Megan paused to draw a breath. “Lupe, this is my friend, Charlotte. I’ve told you about her.”

Charlotte smiled and said, “I feel like I know you already. Megan writes of you often.”

Lupe pulled her into a firm hug. She stepped back. “I’m so glad you’re here. Manuel and I have to go to Mexico. My mother is very ill. I wouldn’t leave Megan now, so close to birth, if I had a choice.” She lifted her hands in supplication. “Can you stay and help when

the time comes? Ay dios mio. It would be a blessing. It is selfish of me to ask, but I'm afraid to leave and afraid to stay."

Charlotte felt three pairs of eyes pinned to her face. Lupe's, pleading. Mike's, hopeful. Megan's, beseeching. She wasn't sure how long she could stay, but she loved Megan like a sister. She was the only friend she had ever been allowed, and she owed her. The money Megan sent made her escape possible, but her journey was not at an end.

But she couldn't, wouldn't, leave her friend in her time of travail. "Of course, I can stay. A baby. How wonderful." She lowered herself onto the seat next to Megan and took her hand. Megan leaned back and closed her eyes.

Mike bent down and placed a gentle kiss on his wife's pale cheek. "Thank you, Charlotte." He blinked suspiciously bright eyes. "I've hired a new housekeeper." Megan and Mike exchanged an unspoken communication of raised eyebrows and grimaces at his declaration. Before Charlotte could query about this housekeeper, Mike plowed on. "I don't mean to put you to work. If you could keep Megan company, I would be grateful. She hates staying in bed."

"That I do, for certain sure. It's only a little while longer and the bairn will be joining us." She heaved a sigh. "Your company will be such a help." A tear ran in a single trail down her cheek.

"None of that," Charlotte scolded her. She wiped the tear from her friend's face.

Megan looked into the field and then at her husband. "Don't you have a ball game to win?"

He laughed. "Ethan, take your horse to the barn and come help me whup the other team. They're getting mighty big for their britches." He leaned over for one last kiss before jumping from the porch to the ground.

She would stay to help Megan with the birth. By then she would have the information she needed, and she would move on. Her

father would come looking for her. As sure as the sun rose in the morning. As sure as the sky was blue. As sure as not one of those children could catch the ball that sailed in a long arc over their heads.

He would come.