

TROUBLE IN  TEXAS > *Book 3*

Stuck Together



MARY
CONNELY



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Stuck Together is dedicated to my oldest daughter, Josie. Josie may be the first person to read what I was writing and say, “She’s pretty good.” And say it like she really meant it.

My husband likes to tell about the time he was complaining about the time I spent writing—long before I was published—and Josie said to him, “You know, Dad, she’s pretty good. She’s as good as some of the books I’m reading that are published.” And because my husband respected Josie’s opinion, he decided to stick with me, go along for the ride, slow and meandering though it was, and see where we’d end up.

Josie was the first one to answer the phone when I called after I got my first contract, too. I’d called my husband but got no answer, and then Josie was next and she was there. She was just so genuinely thrilled for me. It was wonderful.

So thank you, Josie. There were a lot of times early on when it might have been easy for me to give up. Having you say “She’s pretty good” really helped.



CHAPTER 1

BROKEN WHEEL, TEXAS
DECEMBER 31, 1868

Tina Cahill finished hammering a hefty board across the front of Duffy's Tavern. Carefully printed on the board were the words *Abandon Hope All Ye Who Enter Here*.

It sent a message at the same time it nailed Duffy's door shut.

Tina's plan was to get his notice.

"That tears it!" Duffy roared from inside the saloon.

He'd noticed.

She stepped well out of the way, expecting only one reaction from the galoot, and she got it.

With one hard shove he swung the batwing doors open and knocked down her sign, which clattered across the wooden sidewalk. Tina was encouraged when it stayed in one piece. Her construction skills were definitely improving, and that was good because she meant to be at her mission for a long time and she'd need that sign again later.

Duffy Schuster glared at her.

Wagging her finger under his nose, she said, "Close this den of iniquity, Duffy Schuster."

To make her point more fully, she looked behind her for her placard, which she had in addition to the sign so she could nail shut the tavern door with one and march back and forth carrying the other. Her placard read, *Whiskey, The Poison Scourge* on one side, and *LIQUOR, A Thief in Your Mouth that Steals Your Brain* on the other.

She spied the placard on its long, sturdy pole leaning against the saloon and picked it up, intending to wave it in Duffy's face.

"I am sick of you—" Duffy's hot breath blasted her neck.

Startled to feel him so close, she whirled around. It was a complete accident that her placard slammed Duffy right in the head.

Duffy staggered backward through the swinging doors of the saloon, howling in pain. An unfortunately located spittoon tripped him and he fell, pinwheeling his arms.

He backhanded his brother, Griss.

Griss, the worse for drink, bellowed a word that made Tina want to cover her ears. Her hands were busy with the sign, though, so she had to listen to every bit of the foul diatribe.

Tina peeked over the top of the slapping doors. "I'm sorry, gentlemen."

She wasn't really. Well, she was. She hadn't intentionally clubbed Duffy in the head. And it was just the worst sort of luck—for Duffy—that her placard was on a very stout stick. And it wasn't her fault about the stick, either. Why, just last week, Griss had snapped the handle of her sign right in half. So of course she'd chosen a thicker length of wood this time.

But if ever a man needed a few feet of lumber taken to

his head, it was Duffy Schuster, and his brother right along with him. So in that sense she wasn't all that sorry.

Griss threw a punch at Duffy, who tumbled out of the saloon and landed with a thud on his back, saloon doors flapping. Tina jumped away or he'd've landed right on her stylish black half boots.

"Get back, Tina!" Jonas, her brother—who was turning out to be a scold—shouted from behind her. "I told you to stay away from that saloon, today of all days!"

Duffy regained his feet and met his angry brother with a wild roundhouse. Griss ducked and charged, head first, ramming Duffy in his sizable belly.

The two grappled, shouting absolutely improper words that made Tina want to whack Duffy again, and Griss too, while covering her ears.

A woman in this situation definitely needed extra hands.

The two men staggered right toward her.

"Tina! Look out!" Jonas's feet pounded faster on the board-walk. He grabbed her around the waist and whirled her away from the mayhem. Her sign swung, too. She felt it smack someone and hoped it wasn't Jonas.

Tina twisted in Jonas's arms to see her placard had re-directed Griss's next punch intended for Duffy, so it hammered Jonas in the back of the head.

Jonas, the peacemaker, the town parson, her loving brother, shoved her to safety and turned back. "Now, you two settle—"

Jonas took the next fist right in the face.

Tina tried to catch him and went down under him in a whirl of her pink calico skirts. The trusty placard went flying off the board-walk and onto the street. Probably

best to get it out of the scrap anyway lest it be broken. She'd hand-lettered it and it took quite a while to get right.

"You keep your stinking hands off the parson." The smithy, Sledge Murphy, came out of the saloon. None too steady on his feet, but apparently drink didn't stop him from respecting a man of the cloth.

Then Sledge cursed the air so blue that Tina dramatically reduced her opinion of his piety. In fact, it appeared the man just wanted an excuse to jump into the fight. He was a massive man, his arms huge from his heavy work swinging a hammer against an anvil, besides wrestling the horses he had to shoe. When he tackled Griss, it was inevitable that Griss give way and fall backward into Duffy, who flew off the board-walk to land with a thud on the packed earth of Broken Wheel's Main Street.

Duffy's feet swung wide and whipped behind Jonas's knees. Jonas, who probably should have known better than to stand up, tumbled right after Duffy. Griss and Sledge jumped after him.

Jonas went down in a pile of howling drunkard.

Vince Yates—the big oaf—came running out of his law office, charging straight toward the trouble, yelling threats that no one paid attention to. He found time to give Tina one very dire look from his blazing brown eyes, blaming her without saying a word.

Tug Andrews, an old curmudgeon who owned the general store, slammed the swinging doors open and stood for a second looking at the mayhem before him. He had a ragged leather coat on and a battered fur cap. The man looked like he'd just come down from a decade spent in the mountains, and Tina judged him to be old enough and

wise enough to stay out of the fray. Through his thick gray beard he hollered, "Fight!" Then went feet-first into the brawl.

Two more ruffians boiled out of the saloon as if called there by Tug's shout. They jumped into the chaos with a howl that would do justice to a pack of wild dogs. Jonas rolled out of the midst and crawled two feet before Sledge dove on him. Rude, considering Sledge had gotten into this to save a parson.

Vince reached the group, jerked one of the newcomers by the collar, spun him around and pounded a fist into his belly. The man doubled over. Vince caught him by both shoulders, straightened him up, and with two wicked blows sent him reeling to the ground unconscious. Vince turned back to the fight and hauled someone else out. He looked set to end the whole battle single-handedly, dealing with one man at a time.

How organized!

Then Duffy got knocked out of the pile, rolled hard against Vince's legs and he went down. The man he'd prepared to knock into a sound sleep was free to start whaling on Vince, and he did it with zest.

Tina decided to adopt Vince's systematic approach. Retrieving her sturdy placard, she jumped off the board-walk and clubbed the blacksmith over the head. He fell over, cold as a carp. One down, four to go.

She changed that to five when another man rushed out of the saloon. This one shouted "Yee haw!" as he threw himself into the fight with flailing fists, as if fighting were fun.

Men were so strange.

The man Vince had dealt with came around and threw

himself back into the tumult. Six to go. The blacksmith stirred, too. Seven.

Two more men came out of the saloon, and Tina quit counting.

Tina hauled back to whack Griss just as Glynna Riker came rushing out of her diner. Her eyes met Tina's, which caused Tina to hesitate, embarrassed. She had to fight the urge to hide her sign behind her back. Glynna had already seen it, and the placard was taller than Tina, so it would have been pointless anyway.

Her hesitation came at just the wrong time.

Griss reeled back from some blow or other and shoved her into a full horse trough.

With a loud splash she went all the way under the water, frigid in the cold December weather. She surfaced from the distinctly brackish-tasting water and clawed at the sides of the wooden trough to get back on her feet and back to saving her brother. She'd save his friend Vince while she was at it, no matter what a waste of breath that man was.

She lost her grip on the slippery trough edges and went under again.

"Dare, get out here!" Glynna's voice cut through the chaos only because it wasn't a dull masculine roar. Glynna's shout didn't cut through enough to stop the brawl, just enough to be heard by Tina, even with her head submerged.

Trying again, Tina heaved her heavy sodden skirts out of the water, and the whole side of the trough snapped off. She flowed out and splatted face-first onto the muddy mess she'd made of Broken Wheel's Main Street.

Shoving herself to her feet, she slipped and sat down hard, the fall broken mercifully by what was now a mud-

hole. She saw the trough's water wash over the fighting men, and the slippery footing was too much for a few of them, who went down. They churned up a growing swamp as she crawled out of the mire. When finally she got her feet under her, she saw the men now slogging through muck to land a blow. A good dousing hadn't cooled them off one speck.

She saw someone tackle Jonas; enough of his bright red hair still showed through the mud for her to identify him. She waded through the mud to her placard, grabbed it, and charged back into the fray. One good whack on Duffy's shoulders got his attention. He turned, swinging as he pivoted. He realized it was her, and a horrified expression came over his face to see who he'd be punching. Texas men didn't punch women, after all.

But Duffy had already thrown his weight into the swing. Tina jerked the sign up to shield her face, and Duffy slugged it, then shouted in pain. Tina nearly got popped in the nose by the sign, and she fell back into the mud. With her sign knocked away, she saw Duffy clutching his hand, howling, the big baby. He staggered, his feet skidding out from under him. Griss tripped over Duffy and fell. Both Schuster brothers came up coated in mud with drawn-back fists. They recognized each other, smiled—which Tina could not understand at all—then pivoted to dive back into the madness.

Their joint assault knocked men over like ninepins, and now the fight turned into more of a mud-wrestling contest than fisticuffs.

Resolutely regaining her feet, Tina fetched her sign. It was proving to be a fair weapon and decent shelter. She

felt as if the good Lord himself was providing armor from such ruffians, so she refused to fear for her own safety.

With right on her side she went back at the crowd of rioting sots, except for Jonas. And Vince. Rioting, but not sots. Looking into the fracas, she added Dr. Riker. Even coated in mud, she recognized the doctor in the middle of the battle.

She took a solid grip on her sign and got a good back-swing. A blast knocked her onto her backside in the cold mud. Every man froze in his tracks and pivoted to see Glynna with a shotgun, aimed up in the air.

“One more man throws a punch and I’m gonna fire Tina from the diner and go back to cookin’ myself,” Glynna said. Her voice rang out, but you couldn’t call it shouting. It was too musical with her sweet Arkansas twang.

A gasp tore through the crowd. Nothing could have cooled them down more effectively.

They all loved Glynna.

They all hated Tina.

Tina accepted that—the righteous were always persecuted.

Not that Glynna wasn’t righteous.

But no one wanted Glynna cooking again. Several of the men gave Tina a grudging look of appreciation as they picked themselves up out of the muck.

She knew her biscuits alone had earned her the respect of every man there. True, she was no Lana Bullard, the former cook at Glynna’s diner. Tina couldn’t touch that woman’s fried potatoes. But since Lana was locked up for trying to murder Dr. Riker, the men in town had to settle for what they could get. And no doubt they had all found

religion just from praying that sweet, beautiful Glynnia Riker would never go back to her daily burnt offerings.

Even the Schuster brothers ate Tina's food with enthusiasm. Decent of them, considering her only goal in life was shutting down their loathsome saloon.

The men abandoned the fight and stood with only a bit of grumbling. So covered in mud they were barely recognizable, they filed back into the saloon. Tug Andrews, distinct because of his long hair and bushy beard—though it was less bushy due to the mud—slung a friendly arm around Griss's neck.

The two exchanged a smile, then Griss hollered, "The house is buyin' a round."

A cheer went up as the swinging doors flapped shut behind the last of them.

That was so annoying, Tina looked around from where she sat in the mud and found her placard within reach, thinking to make her point by cracking a few more heads.

Jonas crawled onto his hands and knees, then shoved himself to his feet with a grim look aimed straight at Tina.

Vince rose from the muck, his sodden, formerly black vest had an armhole ripped open, and it hung from one shoulder. Vince gave Dare a hand up.

She could see that, under the mud, Dare's eye was swollen.

Jonas had a fat lip, his right arm hugged up against his body, and when he finally moved, it was with a limp. He limped straight for her, a scowl on his mud-caked face.

"Can't you get her under control, Jonas?" Vince used his forearm to clean his face, which made things even worse. His brown eyes burned with irritation, but at least he didn't have that usual stupid smile.

Tina felt some satisfaction in knowing she'd had a hand in wiping it off.

"Me and what army?" Jonas ran his good hand over the mud dripping into his eyes.

"It's a good cause and you all know it. Why won't you help me?" With a generous smile that none of them deserved, Tina added, "I'd be glad to make you placards of your very own."

"Why do you persist in picketing the saloon, Tina?" Jonas reached down for her, flinched with pain, checked the motion and pulled his arm back to his side. "It doesn't change a thing except to stir folks up."

Vince came to Jonas's side, took one look at Tina sitting in the mud and flashed her that bright smile of his. The man must be bankrupting himself with tooth polish.

Tina looked down and remembered she'd been on her face and on her back, so she was coated with mud all around. It was as well her pink gown was an old one.

Shaking his head, Vince said to Jonas, "Let me get her." Somehow that sounded like a threat.

"I don't need anyone to get me." Tina tilted her nose in the air. "My aunt Iphigenia always told me a woman needs to know how to take care of herself, and I can certainly get myself out of this mud."

She shoved herself up, her feet slipped out from under her, and she landed on her backside again. She was very grateful that the mud most likely covered her blush.

Dare came up. He squeezed liquid out of his mustache for a second while he glared down at Tina. He then studied Jonas, shook his head. "Let's take a look at that arm. Come on over to my office."

Jonas gave Tina such a beady-eyed look, she almost faltered in her determination to stop the scourge of demon rum that flowed from the unholy saloon. The Schusters actually only sold cheap whiskey, but demon rum still described the problem nicely in Tina's opinion.

Jonas quit glaring and limped off. Once he was around the corner and no longer looking at her, she renewed her resolve to serve the tiny mission field right in front of Duffy's Tavern.

Glynna asked, "Do you need help, Tina? Maybe a bath?"

Both of Glynna's children, mostly grown Paul and little sweetheart Janny, stood close at Glynna's side, staring. Tina considered telling them it was rude to stare, but then Vince grabbed her under her arms and dragged her to her feet.

She stood, slipped in the mud, and fell against him, adding mud to the front of his ruined vest. He closed his eyes as if he were exhausted, then scooped her right off her feet, swung her into his arms, and sloshed through the mud as he marched down to the diner.

Glynna shooed her children inside with Vince right behind, Tina being toted along like a parcel. A muddy parcel.

Glynna held the door. Once inside, Vince set Tina down on one of the benches that lined Glynna's tables. The man showed little if any care for Tina's rather tender backside—she'd sat down too hard, too many times. Of course she hadn't mentioned her tender backside and she never would. Still, she gave him a disgruntled look, wasted on him because he was already walking away.

He left the diner, closing the door firmly behind him. Tina went ahead and admitted that he just plain slammed it. He went along the board-walk past Glynna's large front

window until Tina couldn't see him anymore. Standing quickly to catch him in the act if he went into that vile saloon, she watched him walk straight for her placard, pick it up, and swing it into a post holding up the porch roof. The stick held, but her painstakingly hand-painted placard smashed into four pieces.

Tina didn't bother to scold the brute. She would nail those pieces back together and be right back on her picket line tomorrow.

Vince picked the pieces up and threw them in the mud, then stomped on them until they were toothpick-sized.

"Fine, I'll make a new sign." She spoke aloud, but of course Vince couldn't hear her.

Then Vince took two steps and found the sign that had started this whole thing.

Abandon Hope All Ye Who Enter Here.

Tina hoped he appreciated her literary leanings. Not everyone could apply Dante to her daily life.

Vince turned to look at the diner and saw her watching him. Glowering, he took the sign along with her stick and stalked off. Tina lost sight of him as he rounded the short row of Main Street buildings. Tina hated to lose her stick. She'd be hard pressed, in this little Texas town, to find another one half as nice. She was still trying to figure out how to get it away from him when she heard the crack of an ax.

With a sigh of disgust, she didn't even run to stop Vince from turning her placard stick into kindling.

"If he knew me well, he'd know I don't discourage easily."

"We all know you very well, Tina. Why do you think Vince is being thorough in his destruction?" Glynna came out of the kitchen. Her words were withering, but she

didn't seem to be overly upset at Tina. No decent woman wanted that saloon in town.

"Let's go over to the parsonage. You need a bath. I'll pour the rinse water for your hair."

The hacking stopped, and Tina followed Glynna out the back door of the diner just in time to see the door to Dare's doctor's office shut hard with a loud *click*. But why not call it as it was? Vince slammed a door again.