

A BETTER MAN



JENNY PLUMB

BLUSHING BOOKS

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CHAPTER 1



1881, OREGON

The sun was low in the sky, and a light breeze had started to cool the late summer day when Emma first heard gunshots in the distance. Her pitchfork stilled in the hay and her ears strained to listen for the unmistakable sound. Three more pops echoed across the plains, and her heart rate skyrocketed. She left the pitchfork where it was, rushed out of the barn, and sprinted to the house.

Emma slammed the door shut behind her, and lifted the heavy piece of wood into place to bar the door against possible intruders. Two more gunshots rang out, sounding closer than the prior ones. She had left all three of her windows open to let the air flow through her house during the day, but now that left her vulnerable to attack. She scurried over to close and latch all three sets of sturdy wooden shutters. Feeling slightly more secure, she focused on what she needed for protection. She grabbed the Winchester rifle off the

pegs beside the door, checked to make sure it was loaded, and then hurried to her late husband's dresser. The bottom drawer contained one more rifle and two new Colt .38 Lightning revolvers, along with several boxes of ammunition for the different guns.

With calm precision, she loaded the two Colts, and realized with surprise that in this moment she was grateful for her husband's love of guns. He'd passed away six months ago, and she never thought she'd be grateful for anything other than his death.

She loaded the second rifle, put all the other guns on the bed, and then stationed herself at the east window with the Winchester. She unlatched the shutter and cracked it open so she could see out and pointed the tip of her rifle through the crack. In that moment, she realized she was grateful to her husband again for refusing to get glass for the windows. But this wasn't his farm anymore, it was hers, and if any man dared to come onto her land, they'd be in for a nasty surprise, because she was a good shot.

A large brown horse with a solitary rider came into view. Her grip tightened on the rifle as he got closer. The horse was coming from the east, but Baker City was four miles due west of her farm, and there were no other towns for over a hundred miles. The terrifying thought of Indians passed through her head. There hadn't been any trouble from them in the Baker City area for more than four years, but the thought of stragglers out for revenge was plausible.

By the time the horse was close enough for her to be sure the rider wasn't an Indian, and that it also wasn't someone she recognized, two more horses with riders could be seen giving chase. The rider urged his horse forward until he was directly in front of her window.

She took aim at his chest, but waited to see what he was going to do before taking the shot.

With a grimace of pain, the man slid off his horse, and immediately fell to the ground. She could see the blood dripping off his saddle where his right leg had been, and watched him crawl across the ground towards her front porch steps and out of her line of sight. As stealthily as possible, she re-latched the shutters, and moved to her south window just above her porch. She opened those shutters a crack, and sent up a silent prayer of thanks when they didn't squeak.

The man used the porch to pull himself up. A painful groan came out of his throat as he forced himself to stand on his good leg before falling back onto the porch steps to sit. He snapped open his pistol, checked for bullets, and let out a curse word that most men wouldn't say in front of a lady. He clicked it back together, and aimed it at the men riding towards him.

Emma kept her gun aimed at the man's broad back, and waited. If luck were on her side, the three men would kill each other before they checked the house.

The other two men slowed down and stopped within yelling distance, but kept back far enough that shooting them would be difficult for anyone who wasn't skilled with a gun.

"You got nowhere left to run, mister!" the man on the right yelled.

"Give us your gun and your horse, and we'll think about letting you go," the older man on the left added.

The man on the porch kept his gun aimed at the man on the left. "The same way you let that sheriff go?"

"That was different," the guy on the right protested. "You ain't a lawman. You're just part of the posse. Go back to being a farmhand and save yourself the trouble."

After hearing that, Emma lowered her rifle. Clearly, she was aiming at the wrong person. As quietly as possible, she tiptoed over

and set her rifle down on the bed, picked up one of the Colts, and went back to the shutter to aim it at the older man on the left. It was quite a distance, but she knew she could hit him.

The man on the left said, "Give it up, son. I've been counting, and my guess is you've only got one shot left. You can't kill us both, and if you do get one of us, the other'll make damn sure you're dead before we leave."

The man on the porch shook his head. "When I joined the posse, I swore to uphold the law, and that's what I aim to do."

"Even if it means you'll die here tonight?" the older man asked.

"Better to die with honor, then to live knowing that I'd broken my word."

Emma rolled her eyes at that comment. Being an honorable man was just fine, but sometimes you had to admit defeat, and save the fighting for another day.

"Come on kid," the younger man on the right said, "We don't want to kill you."

"Sure looked like you took pleasure in killing the sheriff, and those other six men. Not to mention what you did to that poor girl from Weiser."

"That wasn't us!" the man on the right screeched.

"No, it was your ringleader, Paul, who defiled her while you all did nothing." The man on the porch added with disgust, "That girl was fifteen."

"She didn't look like no kid!" the man on the right protested and turned to his friend, "She didn't, did she Buck?"

"Enough!" Buck roared. He took out his gun, and aimed it at the man on the porch. "You're out of time, son. Throw down your gun or die."

Emma had heard enough. There was no way she was letting a

good man die at the hands of thieves and rapists. She took careful aim and shot Buck in the chest.

The next few moments were a blur of activity. Buck shot his gun reflexively, but the impact of Emma's bullet had jolted him, so his bullet didn't hit its mark. The man on the porch also shot almost immediately after Emma, hitting Buck in the shoulder. Emma quickly aimed at the man on the right, but couldn't get a clear shot, because his horse had nervously shied away after the gunshots. Hitting a stationary object at this distance was doable, but a moving target was near impossible. She shot anyway, hoping to at least scare him off. Sure enough the younger man spun his horse around and galloped off the way he'd come. Buck slumped down over his horse, and urged it to start riding away also, but before he made it a hundred feet, he fell off the side, and landed in the dirt. The horse continued to gallop away, following after his companion.

Emma kept her eye on Buck, waiting to see if the man was going to move.

"Hello?" the man on the porch called out. "Who's there?"

Emma stayed behind the shutters, and tried to figure out what she was going to do. She could stay in the house, and let the man bleed out, but her conscience would never forgive her if she did. The alternative was to bring him inside, and help fix him up so he could ride tomorrow, but then she'd be alone with him inside the house. She wasn't sure she could stomach being alone with a man ever again after the things her husband had done to her. She was a tiny woman, and the man on her porch was bigger than most. If he wanted to hurt her, she wouldn't be able to stop him.

She looked out towards the dead man, and realized he was part of a group, and if they came back looking for revenge, another pair

of hands to help shoot the thieves might be the difference between life and death.

“Thank you for your help,” the man on the porch called out. “I’d leave you in peace if I could, but I’m afraid I’m going to need a little more help before I can travel. I’ve got a bullet in my right thigh, and I don’t think I can stand without assistance. My name is George Smith, and I’m the last surviving member of a posse from Weiser, Idaho. We’ve been chasing this gang up and down the Snake River for four days, and there are at least five of them still alive, including their leader. They’ll be back here looking for revenge first thing tomorrow. If someone could help patch me up, I’ll try to make it to Baker City for reinforcements in the morning.”

Emma closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and muttered to herself. “He’s not Samuel.” With that thought in mind, she walked to the door, and pulled the big wooden bar off. She grabbed one of the Colts, pulled the door open, and stepped onto the porch, pointing the gun at the man’s chest.

His eyebrows went up in shock, and then his hands slowly went into the air. “I mean you no harm, ma’am.”

She nodded once in acknowledgement. “You stay where you are. I’m going to go check on that one.” She tilted her head towards Buck. “Make sure he’s dead.”

George frowned. “Are you all alone out here, ma’am?” he looked towards the door, as if expecting someone else to step out.

“Don’t be getting any ideas, Mr. Smith.” She glared at him with mistrust and hatred. “You make one false move, and I’ll leave you out here to die.”

“Ideas?” He glared back at her and shook his head. “I don’t have any *ideas*, I just don’t think it’s safe for you to go check on Buck by yourself. Isn’t your husband home? Or your pa?”

“Both dead,” she said bluntly.

His glare softened. “I’m sorry to hear that, ma’am.”

“I’ll be right back.” Emma ducked under the porch railing and jumped off the side, instead of going down the steps beside George, and started the long trek towards the man on the ground.

“Wait!” George lowered his voice and hissed, “What if Buck is just grazed, and as soon as you get close, he grabs you or tries to shoot you?”

“Then I’ll shoot him again,” she said over her shoulder.

“This is a bad idea,” George said, “Just leave him. Help fix me up, and I’ll check him tomorrow!”

She refused to acknowledge his order, with difficulty. “He’s not Samuel,” she muttered to herself again as she walked. Emma kept her eyes open, checking the horizon every few moments to make sure no one was coming back, while also keeping a close watch on the supposedly dead man for any movement. When she was ten feet away from Buck, she took a deep breath to bolster her courage. She walked up to his lower half, and kicked him in the shin as hard as she could, before jumping back and training her gun on his chest.

When Buck didn’t move at all, she cautiously walked up to his head, and tentatively put a hand out to feel his throat for a pulse. When she felt nothing, she sighed with relief, took his gun, and then stood up to go back to the house. But as she stood the reality of what she’d done hit her. She’d shot and killed a man. She’d taken a life. Her stomach suddenly turned, and she found herself doubled over, and retching into the dirt. After a few more moments of dry heaves, her stomach stopped rebelling. Keeping her back towards the dead man, she wiped at her mouth with the back of her hand, and slowly walked back to George.

His expression of concern only served to irritate her. She

scowled at him, as if daring him to say anything about her weak stomach. His face changed from concerned to angry, and when she got close enough he said, “That was a foolish thing to do. You’re lucky he was dead.”

“Luck didn’t have much to do with it,” she said, feeling defensive. “I’m a good shot, and I was aiming for the heart.”

“You were trying to kill him?” he asked, as if he didn’t quite believe it.

Cringing with a mix of guilt and revulsion at what she’d done, even though she knew it had been necessary, Emma focused on the gun in her hand. “He would have killed you. I don’t know you from Adam, but I know if my choice is between a thief or a lawman, I’ll pick the lawman every time.”

“Thank you,” George said much more gently than before. “You’re right, I’d be dead if not for you.”

Her eyes met his, and she said, “I’m going to help you, but if you try to hurt me, I’ll kill you before the night is over.”

He nodded solemnly. “I’d expect nothing less, ma’am.”

“It’s Mrs. Hunter,” she said. “Mrs. Emilyynn Hunter.”

“I’d expect nothing less, Mrs. Hunter.”

She noticed his features getting harder to make out and looked up at the sky. The sun was dipping below the horizon, which meant it would be getting dark fast. She went to the side of the porch, and climbed up so she could avoid passing him on the stairs. “I’m going to light a couple of lamps before I try getting you in the house.”

Hurrying in, she put all the guns away first, pulled her nice quilt off the bed, and spread out an old one for the man to lie on. Then she lit a small stick from the wood stove, and used it to light both of her oil lamps. She left one on the kitchen table, and set the other on the porch.

Taking a deep breath for courage, she walked down the stairs, and sat right next to the man. “Put your arm around my shoulders,” she said, “and I’ll help you into the house so I can take a look at your leg.”

He looked down at her with some surprise and then glanced back at the front door. “You seemed taller when you were standing. Maybe I should try getting in there on my own.”

“I know I’m small, but I’m sturdy, and I don’t break easy. Now put your arm around me, and let’s go.”

She felt his arm around her shoulders, and gripped his hand securely to keep his arm in place. Then she wrapped her other arm around his back and said, “We’ll stand on three.”

He nodded.

“One, two, three.”

With her help, George got to his feet without too much trouble. Together they made it up the three steps, and into the one room farmhouse. A bed with a small side table stood in the northeast corner of the house with a hope chest at the foot of the bed. Beside that on the north wall were two large dressers. The wood stove stood on the other side of the dressers in the northwest corner of the house. In the southeast corner near the door, there was a rocking chair with a basket of items for sewing and knitting. The southwest corner was full of shelving that held dishes and food, and a kitchen table with three chairs stood in the center of the room near the large porch window on the south wall.

The man took a hobbling step towards the kitchen table, but she said, “Go to the bed. We’ll need to elevate your leg.”

“I’ll get blood on your bedding.”

“It’s an old quilt.”

Within a few seconds, he was lying flat on the bed. As soon as

he was settled, she grabbed the light from the porch, closed the door, and set the bar back in place to keep people out. Then she closed and locked the shutters on her porch window before taking the lamp over to the small table beside the bed.

“I’ll help you get your boots off, okay?”

He nodded and said, “I don’t know how much longer I can stay conscious. On the walk in here I was seeing black dots.”

“Passing out might be a blessing right now.” She pulled both of his boots off, set them on the floor, and then put one of her two pillows under his injured foot.

“Can you manage getting your pants off, or do you need help?” she asked.

“I can manage.”

While he was getting his pants off, she put a pot on the wood stove, and poured some water in it to boil. Then she got one of her husband’s bottles of whisky off the shelf where it had sat untouched for the last six months and went back to George. He hadn’t managed to get his pants all the way off, but they were down to his knees. The sight of his long johns soaked with blood made her stomach twist.

“I’ve got to cut your union suit to get a look at the wound,” she said. “I can sew them back up for you later.”

He nodded in understanding, and she went to get the scissors out of her sewing basket. She found the small bullet hole and cut the long johns open. She leaned over to inspect the wound closely. She pulled at the cloth to look under his leg for an exit wound. “It doesn’t look like the bullet came out the other side,” she said.

“I’m pretty sure it’s still in there,” he said.

“How long ago did you get shot?”

“About fifteen minutes before I got here.”

She nodded and held the whisky out to him. "Have a few swallows."

"I'm not much of a drinking man."

"That's good. Hopefully a few swallows will make you pass out because I've got to dig that bullet out, and it's going to hurt something fierce."

He took the bottle, unscrewed the lid, and took a large gulp. She hid a smile as he made a face at the taste, and believed his previous statement about not drinking much. While he took another swallow, she got the pot of boiling water off the stove and set it on the little table by the bed. She went to her husband's dresser, opened the drawer above the one that held the guns, and searched for the tweezers that were mixed in with his other tools.

Once she had them in hand, she went back to George.

"I can't drink anymore," he said, holding the bottle out to her.

She took it, and sat down beside him on the bed. "I'm going to go over my plan, since you'll probably pass out from the pain before too long, and you tell me if you think I should do anything different."

He nodded wearily, eyes drooping from exhaustion, blood loss, and whisky.

"I'm going to put a little whisky on the wound to clean it. Then I'm going to use these tweezers to pull the bullet out. Then I'll put some more whisky on it before I bandage it tight with some clean flour sacks that I use as towels."

He nodded and said, "Once the bullet comes out, if it doesn't stop bleeding right away with the towels, you should cauterize the wound. I've already lost a lot of blood. I can't lose much more."

She winced at the thought, but nodded in agreement. "I can use my husband's old hunting knife. It's long enough for me to heat the

blade without getting burned, and thin enough not to burn much of your leg other than the entry wound. I've never cauterized anything before. How long do I hold the knife on?"

"Two seconds, and then check it. If the bleeding hasn't stopped, do it for one more second."

She nodded, stood, got her husband's knife out, and went to set it directly on the wood stove with the handle hanging off the edge, so the blade would be hot if she ended up needing it. Then she put the end of the tweezers in the boiled water, and swished it around to clean it before wiping it off with a rag.

"You ready?" she asked.

He nodded. She pulled his belt out of his pants, doubled it over, and said, "You should bite down on this."

He took it from her and put the edge between his teeth.

"I'm going to sit on your lower legs to help keep you still, but I can't do anything about your upper half. You need to be as still as you can."

She took the pillow out from under his foot, and poured a small amount of the whisky directly into the wound. Ignoring his guttural yell of pain, she climbed on the bed, sat on both of his shins, and carefully pushed the closed tweezers into his wound until she felt resistance. Letting them slide open, she pushed them even farther down, and tried to pinch the bullet. He passed out during her second attempt, which made it quite a lot easier to actually dig around inside his leg to find the bullet and pull it out.

The previously oozing wound started pumping blood out much faster. Moving quickly, she poured more whisky on it, and then immediately pressed the clean towel to the wound to stop the bleeding. Two minutes later the towel was soaked with blood, and she knew she'd need to cauterize the wound.

Climbing off the bed, she rushed to grab the knife off the stove, and went back to his side. Biting her lip, she took the towel off the wound, and grimaced before pressing the hot blade to his skin. The sound of singeing flesh mixed with the smell would have been enough to make her vomit if she hadn't already emptied her stomach ten minutes ago. Thankfully the wound stopped gushing after the first application of the blade.

Over the next half an hour, Emma worked on making George as comfortable as possible. First, she undressed him to check for other injuries. Finding none, she set his clothes to the side to wash and mend later. She knew it wasn't right, but couldn't stop herself from taking a quick glance at his naked form and comparing him to her husband before covering his privates with a fresh towel. Then she carefully wiped down his bloody leg, put a folded up clean blanket under him where his blood had soaked the old quilt, and wrapped his wound with a clean towel. Next, she put his foot up on a pillow again to elevate the wound before covering his entire body with her good quilt.

Unable to think of anything else she could do for George in the moment, she went to work cleaning up. She put away the tweezers, the scissors, and the whisky, and gathered up the bloody clothes and towels. Her pitcher of water was almost empty, and she'd need quite a bit more than one pitcher full to wash all of his clothes, and her towels. Looking towards the door, she considered the possibility that the second gunman had circled back around to try attacking instead of going to get the others. Deeming that an unlikely scenario, she bolstered her courage by sticking one of the Colts in the pocket of her skirt before taking the bar off the door again.

She opened the door to the sight of George's horse nibbling at

the herbs in her garden. After sending up a silent prayer that the horse was a friendly sort, she spoke softly to it.

“Hey there, big guy, how about you come with me and I’ll set you up in the barn for the night.”

The horse’s ears perked up and he watched her walk down the porch stairs. The mahogany gelding had a white diamond on his face, white hair by his hooves, and a black mane and tail. He stood calmly and waited as she walked up to him. When she picked up the reins, he followed without having to be pulled, and she smiled with relief.

“You’re a sweet one, aren’t you?” She said. “I think you’ll get along just fine with Sally. She used to be feisty, but those days are long past.”

Once they were in the barn, she let her old tan mare sniff at the gelding for a few seconds, before putting him in the empty stall next to hers. They used to have two horses, but her late husband’s horse, Zeus, had been temperamental at the best of times. She’d sold him a few days after her husband was gone, and used the money to buy a milk cow, Petunia.

Emma made quick work of undoing the gelding’s saddle and supplies, forking some straw onto the ground, and pouring some of Sally’s water into a metal bucket to set on his floor. She put a few scoops of oats in the feeding trough, and said, “That will have to do for tonight,” before patting his rump and closing him in. She took the small saddlebag and bedroll into the house and set them under the kitchen table.

Next, she went to the north side of the house where the roof extended to protect her firewood and dragged her washing basin into the house. Then she started taking trips to the water pump. After fifteen trips she decided she had enough. While she had the

door open, she took a quick trip to the outhouse, and then brought in some more firewood before barring the door shut again.

While she heated up some water to add to the cold water in the basin, she went to check on George to make sure he was breathing. He looked peaceful in his sleep, and very young. She doubted he was a day over twenty-five, and wondered if he were married. Was his wife worried about him, or was she relieved that he was gone?

Focusing her mind on the task at hand, she started the washing. Once each piece was blood free, she hung it on the back of a kitchen chair close to the wood stove in the hopes that they would dry out before morning. Once the washing was done, she sewed up his long johns before hanging them up to dry with the rest of his clothes.

Feeling suddenly weary now that she had no tasks waiting to be done, she got things ready for bed. She put enough wood in the stove to last the night, turned one of the oil lamps off, and turned the other one down as dim as it would go without going out. Since her own bed was currently occupied, she pulled the trundle bed out from under it, and lay down with her clothes on. If George woke up in the night, or if the thieves came back before sunup, she wanted to be ready.