

A CHRISTMAS LESSON



LAUREL JOSEPH

BLUSHING BOOKS

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CHAPTER 1



TEXAS 1875

“*I*t is difficult to believe that Christmas will be here in a couple of weeks, isn’t it?” Emma waved a very feminine, lace-trimmed handkerchief, trying to stir a breeze in the airless, hot stagecoach. She was trying to get one of the other four passengers to engage in a conversation to help pass the time. Emma especially wanted to learn more about the man sitting across from her. He was handsome as could be.

“It is unusually warm for this time of year,” the only other female passenger agreed with a shake of her head. “I will be glad to get home and start my preparations for the Holy Day.”

“Do you have a large family, ma’am?” Emma asked, trying to be friendly to everyone in the cramped coach.

“Yap, yap, yap! Will you damn women shut your mouths? I’m tryin’ to sleep!” An ill-tempered teen pulled his hat down over his eyes.

“Young man, these ladies have every right to pass the time talking. It isn’t their fault that you spent last evening drinking and now

you have a terrible headache.” George Porter was in his early forties, and had teenage sons of his own. He felt it was important to scold the boy as he would his own sons.

“Old man, I would just as soon shoot you as look at you.” The kid quickly produced a gun, pointed it at the banker, who was red-faced and trying not to show that he was suddenly afraid of the boy, or more importantly, the weapon he was too young to own.

“Kid, you put that gun away, then mind your own business before someone takes down your britches and tans your hide.” It was the first time the silent man sitting across from Emma had said anything other than his name and that he was taking a Christmas donation to St. Peter’s Orphanage.

“There ain’t anyone on this coach who could do *that* to me,” the kid said boastfully, glaring at the banker, then at the man who had made the threat.

“Put your gun away, Jeremy,” Emma said softly. “You are upsetting everyone.”

“Well, you are upsetting me,” he stated. “Miss Sunshine got to talk everyone to death. Maybe I’ll shoot you, then we’ll all have some peace and quiet.”

Emma was insulted, and was ready to lean over to slap the impudence off the boy’s face, but before she could act upon her thoughts, the large man sitting across from her grabbed the gun from Jeremy’s hand and gave it a toss out the window.

“Hey!” Jeremy was furious, but he had even more to be upset about two seconds later when the man grabbed him, flipped him over his knee, jerked his pants down to show his red long johns, and started spanking him. Jeremy hollered bloody murder, acting like a little kid, instead of the eighteen-year-old man he considered himself to be.

“You do not speak to a lady in that matter, boy, and you never dare a man to give you a lickin’ unless you can back it up.” Kane Foster wasn’t about to go easy on the boy. He wasn’t going to stop until the kid said “sorry” and meant it.

“Stop it, damn you. I’m gonna kill you for this,” Jeremy yelled loudly. The man’s answer was to spank even harder, and Jeremy was soon begging him to stop. He finally said he was sorry.

“Fine. Tell the lady.”

“Miss Emma, I’m sorry for yellin’ at you. I didn’t mean it about shooting you; I really didn’t.”

“You are forgiven, Jeremy.” Emma was squirming on the seat. It had been years since she had been spanked, but it took little imagination to remember the stinging feeling, and the regret she usually felt when her papa felt it was necessary to discipline her. If he were alive now, he would probably spank her for the mess she was in, but that didn’t matter, she told herself.

“Now, you have something to say to the other lady,” Kane insisted, giving Jeremy another hard spank.

“Ma’am, I beg your pardon.”

“No harm done, young man.” Hazel was on the verge of tears, imagining her son in the same position.

“Banker, I’m sorry for waving my gun at you.” Jeremy wasn’t prompted this time.

“Apology accepted. Let him up, Mr. Foster. I believe young Jeremy has had a change of heart.”

“Very well.” Kane lifted the kid and put him back on the seat beside him, trying not to smile when Jeremy cried out when his backside made contact with the padded seat. He quickly pulled up his britches, then fixed his eyes outside the window, pointedly ignoring the other passengers.

“I remember being on the receiving end of a few of those when I was his age,” the banker said with a smile. “I hated it at the time, but my pa figured it was better to bruise my pride than have me end up in jail for pushing my weight around.”

“It isn’t just boys who need a sound spanking, George. My father was determined that I would behave as a lady, and I was just as determined that I would do as I pleased. No matter how careful I

was, Father always seemed to know what mischief I was up to, and he made his feelings known on my bottom.”

“I cannot imagine you behaving improperly, Hazel.” The banker chuckled.

“I was very spoiled by my mother. We lived in New York, but when Mother died, Father insisted that I move west to live with him. I wasn’t of legal age, so I had to obey him, and it seemed as though he spanked me for something or other nearly every day. I behaved very badly. Then I met my Thomas, and we fell in love. We married, had children, and my wild days were over.” Hazel didn’t feel it was any of their business that Thomas still occasionally felt the need to apply his hand to her backside, despite the fact that their children were almost grown.

“What about you, Miss Emma? Any stories to share?” Kane decided to ask. He thought the redhead was very beautiful; he was attracted to her, especially when he saw her glancing at him off and on when she didn’t think he would notice.

“I lost my parents at a young age. I lived with an elderly aunt, and she didn’t believe in spanking. The only time I recall being physically punished was when I was very young, and I lied to Papa. He impressed upon me that stealing candy and lying about it was very spankable.” She smiled at Kane. “You, Mr. Foster? Did you misbehave as a teenager?”

“Sure did. I had an older brother who took the time to strap some sense into me before I wound up behind bars, or dead,” he admitted.

“He’s a good deal older than you are?” Emma asked curiously.

“Only five years. He was still a kid himself when our folks died. I don’t know how he took care of us both, but he did. He had to grow up fast.”

“How fortunate for you both that he was capable,” George said in consideration, then admitted, “I’m not sure my eldest boy would be that sensible.”

Kane smiled. "I'm betting he would do what James did; ask himself 'what would Pa do?'"

"Maybe so. What is your line of work, Mr. Foster?"

"I do some ranching," he answered. "James and I were lucky that Pa had the ranch paid off when he died; so with some hard work, we could support ourselves. A lot of youngsters aren't so fortunate. Each year around this time, we take up a collection from everyone in the community for St. Peter's Orphanage. Part of it goes toward Christmas gifts for the kids, but most goes toward supplying the kids with clothes, shoes, and other necessities."

"That must take a lot of money?" Emma questioned. "I've been past the orphanage, and there are so many children living there. If not for Aunt Sarah, I would have been raised in a place like that. Aunt Sarah was forever complaining about how much money it took to support me. I think she feared that she wouldn't have enough money to last until I was grown; she wasn't wealthy."

"Your parents didn't leave anything to help support you, Miss Emma? Oh, what a tactless question. I was thinking purely as a banker, Miss Emma; please don't answer that."

"I don't mind, Mr. Porter. There was a little money, and I suspect Aunt Sarah was using it to support us both. She was an old maid schoolteacher for most of her life, and once, I did overhear Papa mention that Aunt Sarah wasn't left well off by her father. But I was a very small child, and truly did not understand most of the conversation that he was having with my mother."

"It appears your Aunt Sarah did a fine job of raising you, my dear," Hazel Gibson said with a smile.

"Why, thank you, ma'am," Emma replied, blushing, but not for the reason the others assumed. If any one of them knew what she was about, they wouldn't bother speaking to her. Emma didn't like herself.

Suddenly, the driver cracked his whip and urged the horses to go faster. "Ladies, get down on the floor," Kane ordered, taking charge as he pulled out his gun. "Sir, are you armed?" he asked

George Porter, who was white as a ghost at the sound of gunfire and Indians yipping as they gave chase.

“Yes, I am armed.” George summoned courage from somewhere, and took out his weapon.

“Can you actually shoot, Jeremy?” Kane asked the teen.

“Yes, sir. I’m good with a gun, but you threw mine out the window.”

“Use this, and try not to get yourself shot in the process.” Kane handed him a gun like the one he was using. “Make your shots count. We don’t have ammunition to waste,” he warned, taking aim and firing. One Apache let out a yell, clutching his chest as he fell to the ground. Kane watched as Jeremy brought down two men, and George winged another. They seemed to be holding their own, until they heard a cry from above them. The driver fell from the seat, and the stagecoach lurched as the horses ran wild, thoroughly spooked.

The Indians gave chase; the three guns holding them back. When it appeared that they were safe from the Apache, Kane carefully climbed from the seat, through the window, then on top of the coach. He moved forward to where Stan normally sat. He realized the reins were dragging on the ground, so Kane leaped from the driver’s bench, and shifted from horse to horse until he was on the lead animal. He finally managed to slow the team to a stop, before he realized the Apache were simply waiting for an opportune moment to attack them again.

Emma was frightened when the screaming Indians came rushing at them. The banker was the first passenger to be wounded. Hazel Gibson checked for a pulse, then sobbed when she realized her old friend was dead. “Poor George! His boys will be devastated.” She picked up his gun, then shot at an Apache who was on foot, and trying to reach the stage. She only wounded him, but the young man grabbed his shoulder and ran in the opposite direction.

“I’m out of bullets,” Jeremy announced. “Does the banker have any on him?”

"I'll—" Hazel started to answer, then fell over on George, an arrow through her heart.

Kane pulled open the door and said, "Come to me, Emma. Right now." Emma didn't argue. She was too afraid to protest anything Kane told her to do. "Hurry, Emma. There is nothing you can do for these folks. Take my hand," Kane ordered, an edge of impatience in his voice. All of a sudden, he took aim and shot an Apache who was trying to open the door on the other side of the stagecoach.

Emma cried out, but Kane took her hand and pulled her through the door opening to stand beside him. He smacked her backside and said, "Get behind those rocks, Emma. Now." Emma rushed to do as he said, the burning handprint on her bottom making her eager to comply. Kane and Jeremy followed her. "Climb higher," Kane bossed. Finally, he was satisfied. "We'll make our stand right here."

"We can see them coming at us from here," Jeremy acknowledged.

"Are you doing all right, kid?" Kane asked.

"I never killed before," Jeremy admitted, wiping away the sudden moisture filling his eyes with his sleeve. "I'll hold it together, Mr. Foster," he promised.

"Good man," Kane praised him, putting his hand on Jeremy's shoulder in support.

"I deserved that tanning," Jeremy suddenly announced. "I was acting like a jackass. Miss Emma, I am really sorry for threatening you. I want you to know that."

"I understand, Jeremy," she assured him. "We all have moments when we are less than what we wish to be."

"Thank you for seeing the good in me. My Uncle Zeke would be appalled that I spoke to you like that. Mr. Foster got my attention for some serious thinking. I appreciate the fact that you called me out on my mouth."

"I was your age once," Kane said with a smile. "Didn't sit too well a few times for the same reason I tanned you. It's over now."

"Yes, sir." Jeremy answered, then said, "There's a man to your right, Mr. Foster."

"Kane," he corrected. "You've grown up a bunch." He took aim, fired, and a man fell forward. Another charged angrily, and Kane fired again. Jeremy reloaded his weapon.

"I heard tell that if a chief is killed in battle, the others would all retire to bury him and support a new chief. Is that right?" Jeremy asked thoughtfully.

"That's true. I haven't seen a chief, have you?"

"No, but I'm keeping my eye open."

"Do you have another gun?" Emma asked. "I can shoot."

"Here is the banker's gun, Miss Emma. I took it so it wouldn't fall into their hands." Jeremy handed her the weapon. "You be careful, it's loaded."

"I know how to handle a gun. I want to be of help in case they charge us."

"They will do that any time now," Kane warned. "Just take your time and make your ammunition count." He'd barely finished speaking when there were screams; the braves rushed them. They defended themselves, and finally, there were no more screams. Kane was pretty sure that they'd shot all the remaining Indians. "We need to get out of here," he decided, standing up to look around. When no one tried to kill him, he hurried the other two into the coach, and he climbed up on the seat to drive the rest of the way.

They finally made it to the small town of Willoughby. The station agent came outside to greet them, wincing when he saw the arrows stuck in the back and sides of the stage. "What happened? Where is Stan?"

"Where is my wife?" Thomas Gibson demanded, rushing to the door of the coach and opening it wide. "Oh my God, no!" he whis-

pered, tears flowing freely as he lifted Hazel's lifeless body in his strong arms.

"Her last thoughts were of you, Mr. Gibson," Emma said. "She was a lovely person."

"Thank you," the man answered with quiet dignity.

"Mr. Porter is also dead. He was a man of courage," Kane said quietly.

"The three of you are very lucky to be alive," the sheriff said thoughtfully as he approached to hear what Kane was saying.

"We wouldn't be alive if Kane didn't take charge. We were in real trouble until he took us up into the rocks." Jeremy offered his opinion. "We had to fight, all three of us," he included Emma. "I was scared," he admitted.

"We were all scared, kid," Kane told him. "It's how you act when you are afraid that matters, and you were a man I would have at my side any day of the week. I'm proud of you."

"Jere, what happened?" an older man asked, approaching slowly on a pair of crutches. He saw the bodies, and the arrows sticking in the stagecoach. "Were you attacked by Indians?" His worry was reflected in his gray eyes.

"Uncle Zeke, you're hurt," Jeremy exclaimed, stepping forward to hug the man.

"I'm fine. Darn horse stepped on my foot is all. Doc said I'll be fine. Enough about me; what happened to you, boy?" Zeke demanded. He was so pale that Kane thought he might pass out.

"The Apaches attacked us; got the driver, Mrs. Gibson, and Mr. Porter from the bank. Kane got Miss Emma and me to safety; we fought to save our lives."

"Jeremy stood tall, Mr. Vanscoy. He's a good man in a fight." Kane made sure to praise the young man.

"I am proud to hear that, sir. Jere and me are all the family we have. When my brother died, I took over raisin' his boy, but I sure didn't know what I was doin'. All I know is I love this boy as much

as if I'd created him myself. He does the Vanscoy name proud this day."

"I was a jerk earlier, Uncle Zeke; you wouldn't have been proud of me then." He bowed his head as he spoke. Then adding, "I made amends though."

"None of us is perfect, son. The main thing is that you realized you were in the wrong, and you said sorry, right?"

"Yes, sir. I meant the words too."

Zeke simply nodded.

"Let me get you home and take care of you, uncle. When did you do this?"

"Today. I'm sure glad you're home; I missed you. I want to take you to Allie's to eat some supper before we go home. You cain't cook worth a good damn, boy," he said, chuckling.

"I hate to tell you this, Uncle Zeke, but you *cain't* cook worth a good damn either." They both laughed. "Let's go get something to eat. I'm buyin'."

"Well, all right," Zeke said, pleased as could be. "I like the change in you, Jeremy Vanscoy. You sound more like your pa every day."

Emma smiled after them, wondering where Tyson was.