

GUIDING GRETCHEN



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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



"So, do we have an agreement on price?" Dagwood Russell held his hand out to him.

Chance Spencer stared at the town barber and mercantile owner as they stood before the porch of the old Russell land. "Yeah, it's a deal. Not sure why with such a sound foundation you don't want to brin' it back to life."

"Ranchin' never was my thing. I could use the money on sellin' the land to get my Molly a bigger house closer to town. She's a city girl and don't take much to livin' so far away from people."

Molly had come out west to take care of a sick aunt and was courted by Dagwood. The barber with his pomade hair and slick tip mustache was the closest thing to city as people would find in Grover Town.

"What a man will do when he's enamored by warm, wet pussy." Chance patted the man on the shoulder blade.

"That I can bury myself in ev'ry night, instead of chasin' around those saloon gals at Manny's waterin' hole for a cost." Dagwood gave him a wink.

"I can see your point. Trust me though, you're still payin'." Chance really didn't think he was the type to get hitched. He had

dreams about building one of the biggest and most prosperous ranches in Grover Town. He'd spent his life here with his pa working at Milton Harvey's farm and ranch and being treated like shit. Since he was Lenny Spencer's boy, Chance was treated the same way. All through those years the spit in his mouth had tasted like acid as he held his tongue. He'd kept his anger in check so his pa wouldn't lose his job. Lenny may have been poor but he had been a good man.

When his pa died, Chance took the first stagecoach to the next town that had a railroad and went down the Mississippi to the gambling boats.

"Worth the cost. One day you'll find your heart held inside a smaller, softer hand. It's good to have you back." Dagwood sauntered to his horse and unhitched its lead before leaping up into his shiny polished saddle.

"Good to be back. I'm goin' to do some more lookin' around then meet you at the solicitor's office to sign the deeds."

"Sounds good. And all the furniture's still in there too."

"Molly?"

"Damn straight." Dagwood tipped his hat to him before riding off.

Turning and facing the house that was a little rundown from years of neglect but still in excellent condition he took a deep breath. His chest filled with the air of his own land and pride. He'd really done it.

Like his name, he'd taken more chances in gambling on the great Mississippi River than any sane man. He'd risked his fortune four and five times over to cash in on the big wins. It had all paid off.

Milton Harvey Jr., or MJ as they'd all called him when they were in the schoolhouse, was goin' to meet his match in Chance. It may take him several years, but he'd put all his effort into making his old rival eat shit. Literally, if he had to. Buying this claim was his first step in proving the bastard wrong. MJ had taunted him relentlessly

because of his tattered clothes and shabby home on the end of the Harvey land, the only thing Chance's pa could afford with the meager funds Mr. Harvey paid his workers.

You're never goin' to amount to shit, Spencer. Your papa ain't nothin' and you ain't gonna be nothin'!

Past words ridiculed him like the taunting of banshees. Chance squeezed the rail leading up to the porch and felt the jagged wood dig splinters into his palm. He could almost hear all the cackling laughter of the other town kids as they gathered around him, supporting MJ. Not because they believed the mean ass's words, but a lot of their family worked out on the ranch and they valued their parent's jobs. One accusing word from MJ and they could be out on barren lands with nothing.

Pushing away from the stairs, he started with his finger and pulled out the first shard of wood in his hand. "Sit tight, Ghost, I'm goin' to see how much work is needed in your new home."

Patting his horse, Chance walked away. Heading to the barn, he took in the expansion of pastures and fields beyond. A hundred yards from the barn was a bunkhouse, weeds were overgrown and blocking the door, but it looked as sound as the main house. At the barn, he noticed the doors were skewed. The rusty hinges would need to be replaced. One of the doors sat forward and left enough room to enter. Inside, it was cool and dim. It was refreshing feeling compared to the cloying heat outside. Standing right inside the door, Chance peered in the low-lit area and considered whether he should go back and get his shotgun. The place had been left unattended for so long, there was no telling what was living in there—coyotes, snakes, and other wild animals.

With a few of the side slats broken, there was enough light for him to walk down the aisle and see the stalls and tack room. He couldn't see how big the loft above was but that was okay for now. Gripping a post close to him he gave it a firm shake and was happy when the roof didn't tumble on his head. Only dust and remnants of hay came fluttering down.

Satisfied he brushed his hands against each other as he turned to leave.

He froze in stride when he heard something rustle. As if something shifted and disturbed the debris on the ground.

The hair on his arms rose. Since he planned to put Ghost in there in the next few days while he worked day and night to get the place in a passable shape, he needed to ensure his horse wouldn't be attacked by something. He kept his steps slow and quiet as possible as he went from one stall to another and peered inside each one looking more carefully than he had the first time. When he started toward the third stall he heard the shifting again.

"Atchoo!"

Coyotes didn't sneeze and neither did snakes. "Well, I guess I got my first squatter."

Huddled in one of the front corners, he could make out a form covered by a tattered horse blanket.

"Come on out," Chance called as he dragged the gate wider so he could enter. He figured some boy was hiding out, running away. When he was younger he'd considered it often. However, not wanting to disappoint his father had kept him from ever going through with his plan.

"Let's go." His voice was purposely gruff. Grabbing the edge of the covering, he whipped it away.

The mass scrambled back deeper into the shadows.

Reaching out, Chance grabbed at the boy, his hand fisting cotton and a flailing arm.

"No. No. Let me go." The person growled and struggled against his hold.

"Not goin' to happen, partner." Refusing to release his hold, he pulled the squirming mass behind him. He didn't stop until they were outside.

"Now tell me why you're trespassing on my lan—" Chance stood before the loveliest woman he'd laid eyes on.

Sunlight striking her disheveled hair turned it into a fiery

rainbow surrounding her face. Pale skin was covered in dirt smudges and her clothing wasn't in any better condition. Her blouse was torn and the swell of one of her breasts, barely concealed by her corset, was visible. The hem of her underskirt hung to the ground.

His stupefaction at the moment allowed her to yank her wrist out of his grasp. "I'll go. I wasn't tryin' to poach or nothin'!" She licked her plump, dusky rose-colored lips.

Damn. His cock stretched behind the front panel of his pants. "There isn't nothin' to steal if you wanted to. Well, not yet." It amazed him that his voice was clear and steady. "Why are you here? A girl shouldn't be out on her own. Unprotected."

What men have failed you pretty one?

She poked her chin out. "I'm a grown woman. I can take care of myself."

"Are you now?" He couldn't stop himself from dragging his gaze along her lithe form. Her breasts were small as was her waist that was drawn in by her corset, but the flare of her hips proclaimed the truth of her words. For a woman of short stature and small upper frame, she filled out the layers of her skirts nicely. The thought of what her ass looked like and the desire to see it in bare fullness had him stifling down a groan of need. "Well, grown woman. No matter how old you are—"

"Twenty-two," she declared.

He was shocked by her proclamation. She was a little long in the tooth not to have a husband tied to her and a passel of children tugging at her skirts. Maybe that's how her fabric got torn.

"I'm sure you have a husband looking for you and some young'uns screamin' for their mama."

Her brows twisted and a shadow came over her face. "I don't have any children."

It was his turn to frown.

"Or a husband." Her eyes shied away.

"Where are you from?"

She glanced up at him, but remained silent.

"Look, I'm not goin' to hurt you. I want to help." He folded his arms over his chest waiting her out.

Twisting her skirt in her fingers, her gaze was skittish as if she were looking for an avenue to escape him.

The urge to take her over his knee and tenderize her backside with his hand for her stubbornness had him rubbing his fingers over his right palm.

"I'm waiting," he growled.

"I don't want to go back." Her voice trembled.

The quivering sound tugged at his heart. One moment he wanted to spank her, the next he wanted to wrap his arms around her and shield her from the world. That wasn't like him at all. He was a solo man. "Your family? I'm sure they're worried."

A tear rolled out of her eyes and she lifted a hand and swiped it away. The moisture smeared away some of the travel dirt on her face. "My ma died."

"Your pa?"

She looked at him, her gaze filled with heat, anger. She shook her head.

That's when he saw the discoloration. Taking hold of her chin he tilted her head up to get a better gander. He brushed away a little more filth with his fingers. In his lifetime he'd had more fights and scuffles than he could count, so he knew a bruise from a fist when he saw it.

"Who hit you?" Heat shot down his spine and his shoulder tensed with rage.

"Pa didn't have much need for a girl in his life. If I didn't leave, I would've been just as dead as my ma."

"Did your pa kill your mama?" If so, Chance would be riding into town to get the Sheriff to ride out with him to see this woman got justice and her pa found a rope as an eternal necklace.

"No. Consumption got her. I cared for her until she took her

last breath almost two weeks past." More tears flooded her sky blue gaze.

He could tell she missed her ma. "Sorry about your loss."

She sniffed and nodded her thanks.

"Well, you can't stay in a rundown barn. Where you headed?"

"Don't know." She shrugged. "I was just tryin' to get far away. After I rested I was goin' to go into town to see if I can get some work." She glanced around. "You got somethin' I can do around here, Mister?"

"Chance."

"Mr. Chance, I can work real hard." She looked over at the house. "Maybe help you get your home cleaned and I can cook real good too. I learned right well from my ma." Her eyes were filled with plea and hope.

He started to shake his head.

"Please. I don't have no place to go." Her stomach growled at that moment.

Shit. He snatched his hat off his head and drove his fingers through the damp strands, before slamming it back on his head. He didn't have time for a hungry waif of a woman on his hands. Stomping back to the house, he walked up to Ghost who was gnawing on the lush over grown grass below his hooves.

Opening his saddlebag, he pulled out some hard tack and buffalo jerky.

He wasn't surprised to turn around and find her standing a foot away. He'd heard the scuffing of her boots as she trailed behind him.

Holding his hand out, he offered her the fare.

She barely hesitated before taking it from his hand and sinking her teeth into it. Her moan was practically sexual as she closed her eyes and savored the travel food.

His cock got harder with the thought of imagining what she would sound like beneath him moaning in pleasure. Was she untried? At twenty-two he doubted the men in her town hadn't

been chasing her skirts. At least one of them had to have made his way underneath them.

In seconds the items were gone from her hands, not even a crumb remaining.

Reaching back he grabbed the canteen and passed it to her to wash the dry sustenance down.

How long it had been since her last meal he didn't even want to know.

As he stood there, resting his back against Ghost's side, he pondered her words. She had a point. He had too much to do getting the pasture and barn together—like hire hands and a team and then ride out in a month to collect the cattle he'd purchased. The previous owner was willing to hold on to them for that long. Even though Chance had no problem sleeping in the bunkhouse with ranch hands, she had a point about the house getting cleaned out.

After a long day of working in the fields, having *his* bed to drop into at night would be a bonus. Closer to his dream being real.

There was just one problem.

"Thank you." She handed him the canteen back as she used the sleeve of her other arm to drag across her chin where the water had dripped from her lips.

Giving her a nod he put the container up.

"So, about the work? I won't get in your way and I can sleep in the barn at night."

"I can't let you do that."

"Oh, okay." She looked around unsure. "I can find somewhere else to sleep."

He sighed, took up his full height. "It's not where you sleep. It's the employment."

"If you need me to show you that I can really clean and cook—"

"I'm sure you probably can do it, honey. However, I can't have an unmarried gal up in my house."

She glided a hand over the top of her ratty locks. "Mr. Chance, I promise not to get in the way of any of your... um, bachelor deeds."

The pink tint of her cheeks proclaimed her naivety.

If he described the thoughts he was having about her, he wondered how deep the color on her cheeks would become.

Just maybe she was untouched.

A thought bloomed in his mind and he wanted to shove it back down. Too bad he couldn't come up with something else. "What's your name?"

"Pa had ev'ryone call me Greta. But, my ma named me Gretchen." A small smile pulled up the corner of her lips but there was a shadow of sadness clouding her eyes.

He could tell she had been real close to her mama and missed her.

"Well, Gretchen, we have a problem." He enjoyed the way her given name rolled off his tongue.

"You're a bachelor."

"And you're unprotected."

"Does it count that I can take care of myself?" She held his gaze.

"Admirable. However the people in town won't feel that way."

She offered a slow nod. "Well, thanks for the food. I'll get off your property now." She turned to the path that led away from the house.

"There's a solution to this," he called after her.

A few steps away, she faced him again. "What's that?"

"You're goin' to marry me."