

I GUESS I LOVE YOU



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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



*NEW YORK, 1862*

“*M*artha, are you about ready to go so we can get our shopping done?”

“Almost, Uncle Franklin. Let me grab my shawl and I’ll be right down.”

A few minutes later he turned to see his eighteen-year-old niece descend from the stairs and into the kitchen. “It took you that long to get ready and that’s what you decided to wear?”

She looked at her uncle with a pout on her face. “What’s wrong with it? It’s clean, and it’s not torn anywhere, is it?”

“No, but young ladies around here don’t wear those split skirt things much. They wear a pretty dress and do their hair up some fancy way, hoping to catch the eye of a single young man.”

“Well,” she said, puffing her chest out and standing tall, “if I ever decide I want to catch the eye of a man I’ll keep that thought in mind. In the meantime, are you ready to go, or do you want to argue about what I chose to wear again before we leave?”

Franklin Welch looked at his niece, whom he loved dearly, and sat down in a chair at the table, sighing. "No, honey, I don't want to argue again. Would you please sit down for a few minutes, though? I think it's time we have a talk."

Martha could tell her uncle had something on his mind, and immediately sat down across from him. She loved her uncle and truly didn't want to argue with him any longer, either. "Certainly. You look concerned about something, Uncle Franklin. Is it anything I can help with?"

"Maybe," he said as he reached over and patted her hand. He took a moment to consider his words before meeting her eyes and squaring his shoulders. "Martha, it's been two years now since your father died and you came to New York to live with me. I hated that your father died. I know you loved him and miss him; I miss him, too. He was my brother, and I loved him, as well. I'm glad you were able to come live with me. I've enjoyed having you here, and I think we've helped each other get through it."

"I'm glad you invited me out here, too," she said quietly. "I don't know what I would have done back in Missouri on the farm alone."

"I think it was easier for both of us to face his death since we knew each other so well. We truly were family before you came out here to live."

"I've known you my whole life. Since you and Aunt Helen owned the farm next to ours, we saw each other all the time." She paused and swallowed hard before continuing. "I was so young when my mother died that I don't remember her at all. Aunt Helen was like a mother to me growing up. I missed you both when you moved here."

"I know you did, and trust me, we missed you, as well. After your mother died we spent as much time at your house as at ours, helping my brother through the loss of his wife, and learning to care for a baby not even a year old yet. Helen did

most of the care at first, but your father learned quickly. You became closer to us than just a niece. When Helen got word that her parents had been involved in a freak carriage accident and were hurt badly, it was a tough decision for us. They needed someone to take care of them, but her father also asked if I would take over running his business until he was able to get back to it. We hated to leave you and your father, but her parents needed our help.”

“We hated to see you leave, but Father and I understood. They needed you.”

“Yes, they did. We thought we would be able to come here and help them out for a little while until they were back on their feet and able to take care of themselves and their business again. We intended to go back to our farm.”

“We thought you would be back, too. I remember Papa said you were lucky when you found someone who was looking for a place to stay, and agreed to run the farm for you while you were gone.”

“We were lucky. We told them our guess was we'd be gone three or four months, and they were happy to do it, thinking that would give them time to find a job and a place to live.”

“Did you have any trouble learning the business? It had to have been hard, stepping in and running it.”

“We'd been here visiting her parents on several occasions over the years, and every time we were here he took me down to the plant with him. They were both hoping we'd move back here, and he constantly offered me a job helping him run it. I'm pretty sure he thought if he showed me the business and how it runs I'd accept his offer.”

“Did you ever consider it?”

“Not really. I loved running the farm, and we were both happy in Missouri. After helping him every time we were visiting them, though, I had a pretty good idea how to run it. He was hurt pretty badly, but he'd have a day here and there

where he was doing better. Every time he had one of those days we'd talk about the business, and he answered any questions I had."

"Did he ever get well enough to go back and help with it again?"

"No. He started improving and we thought he was about ready to go back for a couple of hours a day as long as he didn't overdo it. His wife was slowly improving, as well, and was able to get up and go sit at the kitchen table and talk to Helen for an hour or so at a time while she was cooking. But then sadly he and his wife both caught that awful influenza that was going around. The doctor said he thought it was because they were in a weakened state to begin with, and unfortunately, neither of them lasted very long after that."

"And Helen caught it from them while she was taking care of them?"

"That's what the doctor thought, yes. I still don't know how I managed to avoid it, but I never did get it."

"I'm so sorry things happened as they did, Uncle Franklin. I about cried my eyes out when I heard Aunt Helen passed, but here you were, out here with none of your family close by, and all three of them passed away. Papa said they all died within a couple of weeks. That had to be awful."

Franklin took a deep breath and patted Martha's hand again. "It was, but it's behind me now. What I wanted to talk to you about is our future. I think it's time I stopped living in the past and we look ahead."

"What do you mean?"

"It's obvious to me you're not happy here in New York."

"Uncle Franklin, that's not really true. You've been so generous and kind to me."

"Thank you, Martha, but that doesn't mean you're happy here. I appreciate your kind words, but this is nothing like the area you grew up in, and nothing at all like a farm. The thing is,

seeing you and watching you try to fit in has made me realize I'm not a whole lot different from you."

"I don't understand."

"I came to New York because I was needed here. I wasn't comfortable, but I didn't have much time to think about it because I had a business to run. If I wouldn't have been so busy trying to run a business and help your aunt care for her parents, I would have realized I was much like you are now, like a fish out of water, not happy here. Then when your aunt passed away and I inherited the business, I carried on, doing what I had to do, without really thinking or feeling. I think in a lot of ways I was living in a daze."

"I'm so sorry."

"When I got the telegram about your father's sudden passing, in a way it was like I somehow came back to life. I had a new reason to live. I got to Missouri as quickly as I could and started focusing on what all needed to be done. I talked to the man who had been running my farm and then bought it when it became apparent we would be staying there longer than we'd planned. He made it clear he and his son would very much like to purchase your farm, as well, so we packed up what you wanted to keep and came back here. Since we've been here, though, I've gradually come to see things differently. I stayed here to run the business, but watching you struggling to fit in has made me see that I still don't really fit in here, either."

"You don't?"

"No. As I thought about you and I saw you floundering, trying to fit in, I realized I'm still doing much the same. I've never felt at home here, like I did at the farm in Missouri. I had a business to run so I never allowed myself to think about it, until I've watched you. Now that I've seen you and know you're not happy, it was easy for me to see that I'm not happy here, either. Furthermore, I've been staying here because of the business, but it isn't my business, something I started and am proud of. We

both would have been better off, happier if I would have sold this business and moved back to Missouri and run your farm. Now that I realize that, I can do it now. I can sell this business and we can move. Your farm has been sold so we can't move back here, but we can still move."

Franklin watched Martha as her eyes lit up, something he hadn't seen in way too long. "You would be willing to sell it and move?"

"Absolutely. Life is short, and happiness is very important. Although this business has provided me a nice income, my heart's not in it. I would rather sell it and we can take that money and move someplace where we feel more at home, and find something to do that makes us happy."

"Like what, and where?"

"We'll have to talk about that and decide. If you have friends back in Missouri and would like to return there, I can always write a letter to the sheriff and ask if there are any farms for sale in the area."

She thought for several moments before shaking her head. "No, I don't think I want to go back there. Our farm was a ways outside of town so I didn't see the kids except for at school."

She was quiet, and her uncle rubbed her hand. "I know some of the girls used to make fun of you because you didn't do most things girls did," he said. "Your Aunt Helen felt bad about that, and that's why she tried to teach you how to cook and sew."

"I appreciated her teaching me those things, because they were things I needed to know to take care of myself and Papa. But I didn't really like doing most of those things."

Franklin laughed as he thought back to that time. "I know. You were much happier on a horse than you were in a kitchen."

"I still am," she admitted, "even though now I can take care of a house, too. But I never had any close friends back there, so if we're going to move, unless you want to go back there, I'd rather go somewhere else and make a new start. If we go back there I'm



sure it will bring back memories of Papa taking me to the general store, or on a picnic, or to eat at the restaurant when we went to town to get our supplies.”

“I understand, and I agree with you,” he said. “It’ll bring back memories for both of us. Let’s give it some thought over the next few days and see if we can come up with somewhere else we might like to move to.”

“Okay. Do you want to buy another farm? The money we have from our farm, together with the money you get from selling your business should be enough to buy another farm, shouldn’t it?”

“The money from your farm is your money, Martha. I put it in the bank in your name because it’s yours and I want to make sure you have it. I should get enough from this business to buy any farm or business I may decide I want, but thank you for your offer.”

“But you should have it for allowing me to live with you. You’re providing everything for me.”

“Because I love you and I want to,” Franklin said quickly. “We were never blessed with any children and we both thought of you as the child we never had. We felt fortunate that your father shared you with us. That money is for you, in case you ever need it, or when you get married you and your husband will have some money if you need it to purchase a home or business. But like I said, I’ll have enough when I sell the business, so we won’t talk about this any further. What I’d rather talk about is where we want to go and what we want to do.”

“I’ll do some thinking,” she promised him, a big smile on her face.

“Good. I will, too, and in the meantime, I’ll put the word out that I’d like to sell the business.”

“Do you think it will take long to sell?”

“I don’t think so. It’s a good business and it’s making a good

profit, so I think it should be pretty easy to sell. We better start thinking, so we have some kind of plan when it sells.”

“Okay.” She started to get up, but paused. “Are you sure you want to do this? I don't want you to do it if it's just for me.”

“Nonsense. I would do anything to see you happier, Martha, but honestly, this is for me, as well. You made me see that I've just been going through the motions of life, and it's been passing me by. I'm excited about making a change in my life, too.” He got up, kissed her forehead and asked, “Now, are you ready to do our shopping?”



OVER THE NEXT several days Martha gave a lot of thought to her uncle's words. She hadn't been happy in New York, but she was surprised that he knew that. She'd been truly thankful he took her in, and he'd been so very kind. She tried not to let her unhappiness show. Apparently she hadn't done a very good job of hiding it.

She was ashamed of herself, though, for not seeing that he wasn't happy, either. Thinking back on it, she admitted to herself she'd been so busy trying to hide her true feelings, she hadn't noticed several signs she should have picked up on. He wasn't as jovial as he was when they'd all lived in Missouri. He laughed a lot back then and always seemed to have a twinkle in his eyes. He didn't have the spring in his step she was used to seeing, though she wondered if that was due to his being older and having been through so much over the last five or six years.

Now that she knew this, she was determined to make it up to him. She planned to give this serious thought and come up with an idea that sounded good to both of them. Then she would help him get ready to move, and make the move as easy on him as possible.

They talked about it nightly, but failed to come up with any

ideas they both liked. They agreed they would both like to go back out west, quite possibly to another farm or ranch, but neither of them knew much about anywhere out west other than Missouri, and they didn't want to go back to the general area they lived before. They weren't opposed to another area in Missouri, but they didn't know where or how to start looking for a farm for sale in a safe area. They had heard stories of areas out west where Indian uprisings were fairly frequent, and other areas that didn't yet have any law in the area, which made it a dangerous place, especially for ladies. They wanted to avoid areas like those.

Martha sat down and wrote some inquiries to sheriffs in several towns out west, explaining they were looking to return to the west and asking if they knew of any farm or ranch in their area that might be for sale. If so, she asked for a little information about their area. She wasn't actually expecting to receive any replies, but knew at least this way she had a chance of gaining some valuable information. The next time they went to do their shopping, she went to the postal window at the mercantile to post her letters.

While she was doing that, Franklin went to talk to his banker. Local bankers often knew of people in the area looking for a business to purchase, or that might be interested in investing in them if it was the right kind. He told him of his desire to sell his business, knowing if he didn't know of anyone right offhand, he would get the word out that the business was for sale. Franklin knew he would try to find a seller, hoping to keep the business as a bank customer. There would also be a chance the bank could make a loan toward purchasing the business. As Franklin expected, the banker was certainly interested and vowed to help him find a buyer.

While he was talking to him, he also asked if he knew of any areas out west that might be suitable for them to look for a ranch or farm to purchase. The banker didn't have any imme-

ciate suggestions, but assured Franklin he would start asking questions and see what he could find. He knew of several men who had businesses that required them to travel out west occasionally, and they might have some ideas for him.

Now that they'd laid the groundwork, Franklin and Martha just had to sit back and wait for a response from someone. That proved to be the difficult part. They busied themselves in an attempt to make the time go quicker. Franklin got the business in order, making sure the books were all up to date, and kept the bills all paid as soon as he received them. He also had a few people paying extra attention to cleaning the shop. He wanted to be sure the business made a good impression in every aspect.

While he was doing this, Martha set about going through the house. She separated things that were special to them and knew they would want to take with them, from things they could do without. She gave serious thought to several items, knowing moving across country would be a difficult and expensive task. Depending on where they bought land, things would need to be packed, and could be sent on trains part of the way, but would then have to go by private wagon. It would probably be easier and more economically feasible to sell much of their furniture and other items here and buy new once they arrived at their new home.

Franklin waited two and a half weeks, then started going to the bank two or three times a week to check with the banker. At this point he was more interested in finding someone who might be helpful in deciding on a general area they might want to concentrate on when trying to find a farm. Finally he was given the name of a man who had traveled quite a bit to a few places in the west, including the Nebraska territory. Ralph Amherst said he would be happy to talk to him and share what information he had.

Franklin sent him an invitation to have supper with them a few days later, and was happy when he accepted. He wanted

Martha to be able to hear what he had to say, as well, and to ask any questions she might have.

Martha worked diligently to prepare a fine meal for Mr. Amherst, and make sure their house was spotless. As they sat down to eat, Mr. Amherst explained his business and the parts of the west he was fairly familiar with, including the Nebraska territory. They had a good conversation, during which their guest readily answered every question either of them had, and spoke frankly. The three of them had a very enjoyable evening, and Franklin and Martha thanked him for his help. By the time he left, they had a lot to think about.

Over the next few days as they talked about what they'd learned, they decided to focus their search on Nebraska. There were parts further west that appealed to them, as well, but much of that territory seemed too untamed yet. It sounded like there was good farmland in the Nebraska territory, however, and overall it sounded like it was more civilized, which equated to more ladies in the area. That was important to both of them. They'd heard stories of towns with only a few ladies, and they couldn't walk around town alone safely.

Several days later Martha was again at the mercantile picking up some supplies, and stopped by the postal window to see if they'd gotten any replies. She was surprised to hear she had two. She put them in her pocket so she could read them and absorb the information later, once they were home. She and her uncle finished their shopping and headed for home.

Once they were out of the busy part of town she shared her news, pulling the two envelopes from her pocket. Both were eager to hear what the sheriffs had to report, so she opened the first one, which was from a small town further west from the Nebraska territory. She scanned it quickly, then read the disappointing letter to her uncle. It basically warned them of what they'd heard; that part of the area was sparsely populated, and

most of the residents were men, some of whom were not to be trusted around ladies.

She folded it back up, returned it to its envelope and turned to the next one, which was from a town in central Nebraska. It was much more encouraging. It was from a Sheriff Thomas Hanley from Gully Ridge. He reported good farmland in that area, and he knew of two farms for sale at the moment. He described their town a bit, which sounded good to Franklin and Martha. He also said there was more land further west that was available to be claimed yet. It would require some hard work to build a house and barn and turn the land and prove it able to be farmed, but it would be theirs once that happened.

As they talked the next few days, the idea of claiming land was tempting. As long as they lived on the land and farmed it, they didn't have to pay for it, which would be nice. Instead of using part of his money to purchase a farm, Franklin thought he could use his money to purchase the equipment, animals and seeds he would need for his first year or two of getting a farm operating. As nice as that sounded, they realized that would mean living on land that had no house and the land would need to be cleared before it could be tilled, which would be a big job.

Both of them felt they would probably be able to do it and were up to the challenge, but there were some unanswered questions. They didn't know what kind of wildlife they might encounter and how much of a problem they might be. They also didn't know if there would be an abundance of trees to use for building houses, or if there was a sufficient number of creeks and rivers to provide water for livestock. They would definitely need to get answers to those questions before undertaking such an adventure.