

A Firm Husband

By

Sue Lyndon

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Chapter One

Clara hugged her best friend, Mabel, and wished that goodbyes weren't so hard.

"I'll miss you too!" Mabel said, clutching Clara tightly during the early hours of a cooler-than-usual July morning in Wyoming.

"Oh, don't cry," Clara said, feeling a stab of guilt. "I know you think I've lost my mind, but I'll make something of myself. Or I'll at least see the world while trying." Smiling sadly, she rested a hand upon Mabel's bulging tummy. The horses hitched to the stagecoach rustled impatiently.

"Well, you must promise to write! Lord knows I wanted you to be the baby's godmother, but I suppose you can be the crazy aunt."

"Of course I'll write. And I will come back someday," Clara promised. The stagecoach driver whistled, and her stomach subsequently flipped. She was really going through with this!

Mabel kissed her cheek and they parted. Clara boarded the stagecoach to find the only other occupant – an elderly man – sleeping with the scent of whiskey surrounding his personal space.

Abruptly, the coach took off and Buffalo was soon a speck on the twilight horizon. The old man's snores competed with the general noise of horses stampeding and the inevitable swaying of the stagecoach. But no amount of noise could stifle the perpetual second thoughts racing through Clara's mind. Was she doing the right thing?

Buffalo was all she'd ever known. She'd barely left the ranch, let alone the town, save a onetime trip to Laramie to help a cousin who'd just had twins. Her pa would be livid when Mabel passed along her goodbye note, but Clara hadn't had the courage to tell him face to face about her travel plans. And she intended to travel far away from Buffalo and Johnson County, Wyoming all together.

She tried to convince herself that Pa would be fine. Aunt Martha did most of the cooking and cleaning anyway. It wasn't as if she was his ranch foreman. But what did it matter? In two days' time, the stagecoach would arrive at Cheyenne and she would board the Union Pacific Railroad. Philadelphia was her ultimate destination. Her cousin from Laramie had friends there and always talked about her visits to the city. Despite Clara's outspoken desire to travel east just once, Pa believed there was plenty to see in Wyoming.

Clara considered sweet, fretful Aunt Martha. She will definitely miss me, thought Clara. She was ashamed that she'd left the ranch in the middle of the night without proper goodbyes, but neither Aunt Martha nor her pa would've permitted this trip. Especially alone.

The stagecoach swayed harder and Clara shuddered. She would soon be train-bound for the east coast, fulfilling her childhood dream. Hopefully the money she'd saved from tutoring neighboring rancher's children would sustain her for a while. She hoped to eventually find a nice town on the east coast where a schoolteacher was needed.

With second thoughts still racing through her mind faster than the galloping horses ahead, she drifted to sleep as the sun peeked over the snowcapped mountains.

* * *

Cheyenne was larger than Buffalo, and Clara thought it was a pleasant town. Snow-capped mountains loomed to the west just as they did in Buffalo, although this mountain range

wasn't as grand as the Big Horn Mountains from home. But even this change of scenery wasn't enough. No, it wasn't the east coast. So in a half hour, she was leaving, having already booked passage on the Union Pacific Railroad. She gazed at the steam engine, completely flabbergasted. It was marvelous – just like the drawings she'd seen in the general store back in Buffalo.

Her bags had already been loaded, but she planned to explore the town until the whistle blew. Her whole life had been spent buried in books, but now she was going to see the world for herself. No way was she waiting on an unmoving train a minute longer than necessary.

Impulsively, she headed for the general store one last time. While she didn't need anything in particular, she thought to buy herself a going away present. Something little and trivial. Her current mood contradicted the freedom that should've been bursting within her, and with a bit of childishness, she figured a present would lift her spirits.

Not long after passing the bustling saloon, a tall man in a high-crowned, wide-brimmed hat approached from across the street. Just as she was about to smile and say "good evening," a surprise greater than the surprise her pa likely felt after reading that goodbye note stopped her cold in her tracks. This man was no stranger! Mutual recognition lit in his dark brown eyes before she could duck her head lower.

"Miss Sutton . . . Miss Clara Sutton?"

Her blood ran cold. She was a four day long stagecoach ride away from Buffalo. She wasn't supposed to be seeing people she knew . . . not this far away! "Uh . . . yes. It's me. Good evening, Mr. Davies."

"I thought that was you. What brings you to Cheyenne, Miss Sutton?"

She fumbled. William Davies was the son of a neighboring rancher. Though she hadn't seen the man in years, if Clara told anyone from Buffalo she was traveling alone, it would only arouse suspicion. "I'm accompanying Aunt Martha back east," she said, frightened by how easily the lie slipped off her tongue.

William Davies looked taken aback. "Both you and your aunt are traveling east? Who's tending house for your pa?" he asked.

"He got remarried," Clara said, this lie stinging worse than the first one. But there was no retracting the words. She had to escape Mr. Davies. As soon as possible!

"I am pleased to hear such happy news, Miss Sutton," he replied, but his words were strained somehow. "I'm headed back to Buffalo in two days' time. I'll be sure to stop by the ranch and give him my regards."

"Thank you, Mr. Davies," she said, her stomach twisting painfully. Lying always made her feel rotten. "I believe he will appreciate that."

William Davies smiled and held her eyes, which left Clara incredibly uneasy. Two wagons passed by quickly, so she gazed in the direction of the kicked up dust, thankful for the brief distraction. Truth be told, while Mr. Davies had been a neighbor, she hadn't known him well. He was several years older and had gone off to college in Boston to become a banker like his older brother, Randolph.

"Well," he began, "It would please me to greet Aunt Martha. I owe much of my success to her, particularly since she taught me how to read with the patience of a saint."

Oh, the lies! How would Clara find a way out of this mess? Instantly, she regretted not telling Mr. Davies she was traveling alone. While he would've likely raised an eyebrow, at least she wouldn't be trapped in such a detailed lie. Most of all, she ached for claiming her father had remarried. "I . . . I . . ." But Clara's mouth was so dry she couldn't speak.

“Miss Sutton,” he said in a voice bearing deep authority. “I hope you know how sick you have worried your pa and Aunt Martha.”

Unconsciously bracing herself against a vacant hitching post, Clara’s stomach flip-flopped. Caught! But how could he know? “Mr. Davies, I’ve no idea what you’re talking about. It was nice seeing you again,” she said matter-of-factly before attempting to move past him.

“Halt,” he said, gripping her arm with a firmness equal to his glare. Despite her brief struggle, he held tight.

“Mr. Davies . . . ,” she began, but was interrupted with a slew of firm words.

“Miss Sutton, the only thing I despise more than being asked to intercept a runaway girl is being lied to.” A couple walked by eyeing them with mild curiosity, and Mr. Davies pulled her closer.

Clara met his gaze with a raised chin and blazing eyes. “First of all, I’m not a girl. Second of all . . . ”

“Enough!” he growled. “I already had your belongings placed in the hotel. I’ll be bringing you back to Buffalo on the next stagecoach.”

“But . . . ”

“End of discussion. I’ll tan your hide right here if the next words out of your mouth aren’t yes sir.”

Clara balked. Who did William Davies think he was? But when he reached out, she lost her nerve and muttered, “yes sir,” with as much insolence as she could muster.

The hotel was simply a small room above the saloon, but that wasn’t surprising. Buffalo had the same accommodations. And sure enough, the two pieces of luggage she’d had loaded onto the railcar rested against the farthest wall, underneath the window overlooking the street. The room contained a small dresser, a bed, a clawfoot tub, and a tiny table with two chairs.

To Clara’s surprise, Mr. Davies closed the door behind him and wrenched his boots off. “What do you think you’re doing?” she asked angrily, curling her fists in little balls at her sides.

“Little girl, there’s no way I’m leaving you alone in this room. I plan to wire your father in the morning saying I found you and you’ll be returned home soon, that’s for sure.”

She seethed and opened her hands in exasperation. “Mr. Davies, I am a respectable woman. I won’t share a room with you! Now get out!”

He strode forward wearing a thick mask of anger. “You’d better lower your voice if you know what’s good for you,” he threatened. His eyes narrowed, just daring her to disobey.

The tension was too much, and Clara cast a sorrowful glance towards her luggage while Mr. Davies loomed over her awaiting a response. She couldn’t return to the ranch and face her pa and aunt. Not until she saw the world. Mr. Davies had obviously spent a great many years outside of Buffalo. Some of her friends had visited the east coast. It wasn’t fair.

Before there was time to respond to Mr. Davies’ threat, the steam engine whistled. The train was leaving, and her dreams were being taken along with it.

“You bastard!” she yelled. “You unbelievable bastard!” She had missed the train and it was all William Davies’ fault. She raised her chin even higher to meet his icy glare. Oh, how she hated the man!

The next words out of Mr. Davies’ mouth were eerily calm, yet they could’ve moved mountains. “You ran away from home, Miss Sutton. You boldly lied to me when we met in the street. And now you have refused my request to lower your voice, not to mention the cursing,” he said. “I am going to teach you a lesson, Miss Sutton – over my knee.”

Clara's eyes bulged of their own accord and she lowered her chin a notch, suddenly short of breath. She was very aware of Mr. Davies – physically – and second guessed her prior boldness. He was tall and muscular, his starched white shirt hugging his broad chest underneath a leather vest. His hair color matched that of his eyes. And the resolve in those dark brown eyes was frightening.

“Mr. Davies, you are not my pa or my husband,” she said, her voice cracking over the last few words. Damn the man for adding trouble to her already guilty conscience!

“Consider yourself lucky that I'm not your husband,” he said. “Because if I was, you'd get a hard spanking each and every time you cursed or raised your voice at me.”

Clara opened her mouth, but was rendered speechless under his stern gaze, so she stepped back in hopes that physical retreat would ease the gathering tension. To her relief, Mr. Davies moved away. But as she glanced mournfully out the window, the next words he spoke stilled her breath.

“Miss Sutton, I meant it when I said I was going to teach you a lesson. You're going to get the spanking you deserve. Come here. Now.” His voice was dangerously steady, dangerously certain with no room for compromise.

“Like I said, Mr. Davies, you're not my pa or my husband. You have no right.” She was suffocating. She had to get out of this room!

“Your father wired me a message that you were headed for the Union Pacific and to stop you by all means. He also asked me to return you to Buffalo personally if I caught you in time. That makes me your guardian for the next few days, and as your guardian I have every right to give you a good spanking if warranted.”

“But . . .”

“No more stalling.” He motioned for her to join him on the edge of the bed. Clara remained frozen near the window, completely horrified.

“Please, Mr. Davies,” she said, trying to sound humble, “I promise I won't curse or raise my voice at you again.”

“I said no more stalling,” he admonished. “If I have to come get you, I will pull down your pantaloons and spank your bare bottom.”

Determined not to allow Mr. Davies to lay a hand on her, Clara moved slowly towards the bed where he waited, but zipped towards the door when she was just a few steps away. If she could get into the hallway, then she could scream for help. But just as she twisted the knob, strong arms wrapped around her waist, pulling her back inside.

“I warned you,” he growled in her ear. She fought against his hold, but it was to no avail. The door was bolted from the top now, and Mr. Davies was winning.

A sharp smack suddenly stung Clara's bottom, overtop her dress. Before she could protest further, she was forced across Mr. Davies lap on the bed. One leg wrapped around her ankles and he expertly pinned her flailing hands down. She was trapped, and he meant to teach her a lesson.

Despite the continued struggle, Mr. Davies pushed her dress up, swiftly peeling down the white pantaloons – as promised. The cool air of the room brushed her bottom and then . . . smack! Mr. Davies was spanking her, true to his word.

“Please!” Clara yelled. “Let me go!” She twisted and tried lifting her head, but was pinned too firmly in place. This can't be happening! she thought. Her bottom burned terribly under Mr. Davies swift blows, and her creamy white flesh quickly reddened. No area was left unpunished, not even the backs of her poor, tender thighs.

“You will mind me,” smack, “during the next few days,” smack, “or you will face the consequences,” smack, “under my hand,” smack. Clara’s bottom burned something fierce and it was difficult to breath, let alone speak.

It was a heavy spanking. Heavy, and swift, and long. Her eyes burned as hot tears gathered and finally fell onto the coverlet. It wasn’t long before her back heaved as she sobbed freely through the painful humiliation. Again and again, Mr. Davies’ hand came down forcefully upon her exposed backside, smack after smack with no end in sight.

Clara’s sobs eventually lulled to a whimper, and she went from struggling to laying limp across his lap. She’d spent all her energy trying to escape, and the spanking went on and on. “Please, Mr. Davies,” she begged through her tears, “Please . . . I can’t take anymore.”

He slapped the lower curve of her bottom several more times, hitting the same spot repeatedly. She cried out in pain, wondering how much more she would have to endure. But to her relief, Mr. Davies paused, his hand resting upon her punished flesh. She was still crying, despite the reprieve. Never in her life had she experienced such a long, painful spanking. Clara truly pitied the woman who would one day marry Mr. Davies.

“Do you have any idea how worried your pa is, Miss Sutton?” His voice was accusatory and his words stabbed at the center of her conscience, reinvigorating those second thoughts about running away and leaving her with terrible guilt all at once. She sobbed harder.

“I’m sorry. I . . . I know I shouldn’t have run away like that,” Clara finally admitted. Her pa was good to her, and life on the ranch hadn’t been awful in the least. She suddenly missed Pa and Aunt Martha more than anything.

“Lying to me in the street was a bad idea too, Miss Sutton.” He smacked her glowing backside again, once but very hard. “And your behavior towards me in this hotel room has been atrocious.” Another single, but very firm, slap fell across her reddened bottom. Clara gasped.

“I’m sorry I cursed at you, Mr. Davies. Truly, I am.” And she was. She was ashamed. Aunt Martha had taught her better manners than that. No self-respecting lady curses so freely, not ever.

Clara tensed as Mr. Davies rested a hand upon her throbbing flesh again, half-expecting another slap to fall. “The next stagecoach is departing for Buffalo in two days, Miss Sutton. It will take another five days to reach your father’s ranch. I am escorting you there not only as your guardian, but as your father’s new foreman. I will not hesitate to punish you again if you disobey me or misbehave in anyway. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” she mumbled, sniffing loudly against the coverlet.

“Good,” he said.

Slowly, Mr. Davies released his hold and carefully pulled her up. Like a gentleman, he turned while she adjusted her pantaloons underneath her dress. Clara winced and casually clasped her hands behind her back, a nonchalant effort to sooth her burning bottom.

“No rubbing!” Mr. Davies barked as he turned around. Completely mortified, she dropped her hands and stood awkwardly.

The air was tense, ready to snap and burn, it seemed. Clara was beyond humiliated and truth be told, very sorry for her actions – especially sorry for running away. What fun would it be to explore the world if those left behind suffered for her absence?

Suddenly, Clara burst into tears and buried her face in her hands. Leave it to her to create such a mess of things, and she hated that William Davies witnessed her crying like this. How could she possibly survive the next few days with him? And when she remembered he would be the new foreman, the sobs began anew.

“Shh . . .” Mr. Davies whispered, moving closer. To her surprise, he pulled her tight against his chest, holding her until she was cried out. His musky scent filled her head, and his gentle presence was more comforting than she would’ve ever imagined.

Once she calmed down enough, they sat beside each other on the bed. Clara stared at the floor while Mr. Davies rubbed tender circles on her back. “Are you hungry?” he asked.

She nodded.

A half hour later, they sat at the tiny table in the room, eating chicken soup and bread brought up by the saloon owner’s wife. Mr. Davies insisted they eat in the room, and Clara dared not argue. Her bottom stung terribly and she continually shifted in her seat, searching for that nonexistent comfortable spot.

A smile tore at the corner of her self-appointed guardian’s mouth. “Sore?” he asked.

Clara flushed but said nothing, burying her embarrassment behind another spoonful of soup. She wanted nothing more than to hate Mr. Davies, but she found herself strangely drawn to him. With his broad shoulders and tan face surrounded by dark brown hair, he was possibly the most handsome man she’d ever encountered.

“Mr. Davies?” Clara asked, feeling increasingly shy. “Why are you going to be my pa’s new foreman? What happened with Andy? And . . . I thought you were a banker in Boston?”

He straightened and met her curious, timid gaze. “I completed college a few years ago and worked in Boston for a while. But . . . I missed the west. My father would hear nothing of me returning to work on the family ranch. We are on the outs right now,” said Mr. Davies, frowning. “But I arrived in Cheyenne a few days ago, despite my father’s disapproval. I’ve been staying here in the hotel, wiring old acquaintances about possible jobs. I’m not sure what happened with Andy, but your father responded to my wire with instructions to bring you back to Buffalo. He said if I found you, then the job was as good as mine.”

“I see,” she said. “Well, congratulations on the new job.” Clara wasn’t sure what else to say, even though she hated that Mr. Davies job was contingent upon her return to the ranch . . . the ranch she already missed terribly.

“Thank you, Miss Sutton. I hope you can understand why it is so important that I get you back to Buffalo now, however I do regret if I’m spoiling your happiness.” His eyes were sincere. “But despite your wishes to travel east, a woman traveling alone is asking for trouble. For that reason more than any other, I’m glad I found you in time.”

She was lost in his gentle eyes, the same eyes which had been as hard as diamonds not long ago. “I’m glad you found me in time too, Mr. Davies. I’m sorry I gave you so much trouble.”

He smiled. “So does that mean you’ll be on your best behavior for the next few days?”

Clara’s face burned, and she feared she was as beet red as her punished bottom. “I know I shouldn’t have left pa and Aunt Martha like that.”

“You didn’t answer my question,” he chided, another gorgeous smile pulling at his lips. “Are you going to be on your best behavior? Or will I have to spank you again?”

She fumbled. Who did William Davies think he was? Despite his modest smile, his rigid posture told her he expected an answer. “I’ll be on my best behavior, Mr. Davies. I don’t want another spanking.”

“Good,” he said, and they finished dinner in semi-comfortable silence.

The saloon owner’s wife collected their dirty plates and brought extra blankets at Mr. Davies’ request. She eyed them suspiciously from between her flaming red curls when he declined the offer of an extra room, but left without another word.

William Davies nodded towards Clara's luggage and said, "Go on and get ready for bed." He turned his back as she undressed, quickly slipping into her cotton chemise. Her long blond hair fell to her shoulders as she removed the pins. When she was all ready, she stood hesitantly, waiting for him to face her and wishing she'd packed a thicker nightdress. Their physical proximity in the small room made Clara terribly uncomfortable in a way previously unfamiliar to her. Half of her wanted to be close to the man, but the other half of her wished to be miles away.

He dimmed the lantern. "You take the bed," he said. "I'm sleeping right here in front of the door. Remember that in case you get any novel ideas."

Clara winced. Despite her promise to behave, he didn't trust her entirely. "Good night, Mr. Davies," she said, crawling beneath the covers and appreciating the coolness of the sheets, especially against her burning bottom.

"Good night, Miss Sutton," he said from the floor.

Sleep didn't come easily to Clara that night. She was relieved and felt safe, yet she was terrified of something. Pa and Aunt Martha would eventually forgive her, she knew. That wasn't what kept her awake. It took a lot of tossing and turning to realize the problem – that she was very much intrigued by and attracted to William Davies, despite how imposing and firm of a man he was. The realization was alarming, and she vowed to ignore the warm feelings for him. She also vowed to avoid another spanking at his hand.

Being punished by Mr. Davies while she hated him was one thing, but being punished by him when she felt affection for him was somehow terrifying.