

A Firm Husband

By Sue Lyndon

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Chapter 1

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 awhile. 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 snow capped 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

passed 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 salon, 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 your 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 rushed 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 fathers 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.

Chapter 2

“How old are you?” asked Mr. Davies. They were walking along the railroad tracks, taking in the sights around Cheyenne. The mountains were capped with white, despite the summer month, and the plains stretched green and gold beyond the horizon.

“Twenty-two,” Clara answered, feeling suddenly uneasy. “And you?”

“Thirty-two. I didn’t realize I had a decade on you.” He kicked a large stone and it ricocheted outside the tracks. “So how come you ain’t married?”

Her stomach plunged to her feet. “I . . . I . . . was supposed to marry Ron Fieldman two summers ago, but he died.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I didn’t know him very well, but he was a good man.” She paused, failing to add that she’d refused a few other suitors, much to her pa’s outspoken dismay – another reason why she’d left the ranch. Both Pa and Aunt Martha had been pressing her to settle down. “Why aren’t you married?”

William Davies laughed, tilting his head towards the blue sky. “Well, I think I spoke of Wyoming a little too much with the ladies I called upon in Boston.”

Clara smiled. “So they were afraid of becoming ranch wives?”

“I suppose, though none of them told me outright.”

Her pulse raced and she felt lightheaded. This turn of conversation left little room to the imagination. Both Mr. Davies and Clara were past the usual marrying age, and here they were, thrown together by the most unusual of circumstances.

“Do you want to see the clock tower?” he asked.

Clara turned towards skyline of Cheyenne and regarded Mr. Davies. “What do you mean? We can see it from here. It’s hard to miss.”

He smiled, shaking his head. “What I meant was, do you want to see it from the *inside*?”

Clara beamed. The tall structure had captivated her since arriving in Cheyenne. Mr. Davies must have caught her looking at it more than once. “That would be wonderful! Do you think anyone will mind?”

“I’ve gotten friendly with the clock tower keeper,” he said. “I’ve been in the guts of the thing twice now. It’s a sight to behold.”

Sure enough, the clock tower keeper, an elderly man named Charles, greeted Mr. Davies with a firm handshake. The old man smiled warmly as the introductions were made and they talked amongst themselves for a while, mostly about Mr. Davies new job. To Clara’s relief, her running away wasn’t mentioned during the conversation. Instead, William Davies spoke as if she’d traveled from Buffalo just to offer him the job on her pa’s behalf.

“Well, come on up,” Charles said. “This here clock tower ain’t stopped once in the years I’ve been keeping it.”

Charles led the way up the stone steps. When the old man was out of hearing, Clara turned to Mr. Davies. “Thank you for not embarrassing me.”

“You’re very welcome, Miss Sutton,” he said, squeezing her hand briefly before ushering her ahead up the steeply laid stone steps. She gathered her dress, struggling to catch up with the quick old man already at the top.

Charles dove into a detailed explanation all about the insides of the clock tower, but most of it went right over Clara’s head. “The cast iron dials on the clock face are . . .” he began.

She smiled and nodded occasionally, and truly admired the strange circular iron workings of the marvelous timepiece. She imagined she was a tiny ant stuck inside a gentleman's pocket watch, observing time as it ticked by and by.

"Look up," Charles said, pointing. "There's the bell in the belfry. When the weights in the bottom drop, the bell rings."

"And that's the pendulum, right?" Clara asked.

"That's right." The old man smiled and his wrinkles deepened into miniature canyons.

After the grand tour and bidding goodbye to Charles, Mr. Davies suggested they visit the general store. He'd sent a telegram to Clara's father hours ago and wanted to check on a reply. So as Mr. Davies waited for the owner to come out of the back, Clara browsed the aisles. The Buffalo general store was about the same size, she thought. Two elderly men were engaged in a ruthless game of checkers atop a barrel, and she moved past them to inspect a row of dresses. A girl about her age was in the aisle nearby, straightening a row of oil lamps.

"Good morning," Clara said, smiling warmly at the other girl.

The blond girl looked up, her face drawn with amusement as she looked Clara up and down. "Looking for a new dress?" she asked.

Clara glanced back at the row of dresses for a moment. "They're beautiful, but I'm not shopping today." Truthfully, her Aunt Martha could sew prettier dresses than these, but Clara wasn't about to say that out loud.

"Oh," she said, looking at Clara's dress with ridiculing eyes. "Too bad."

Clara's face burned angrily and she stared daggers at the still-smiling girl. The nerve! Sure, her dress had seen better days, but it had been her mother's dress and one of her very

favorites. And besides that, Clara's suitcases had much nicer dresses than these, calico and trimmed with lace.

Clara imitated the girl's intake of her attire, raising her eyebrows in mock surveillance. "Well, we don't all earn money selling our virtue one customer at a time in the saloon."

"Well, I never . . ." the girl began, and continued by throwing an imaginative variety of insults Clara's way, all delivered in a high pitched squeal. She quickly became red-faced and Clara imagined she favored a whistling teapot.

Clara stood her ground, meeting each of the girl's insults with a clever retort. To her credit, she didn't raise her voice, nor did she curse in return. The old men playing checkers chuckled in the background.

"You're just a foundling in disguise," the girl screeched, looking as if she was all out of insults.

Clara smiled. "I thought we already established that you were the foundling, the diseased darling of the saloon."

"What's going on here?" a voice thundered. It was Mr. Davies. A middle aged man in an apron stood beside him.

Clara's adversary pointed her chin high in the air, looking towards the other man. "Darling, this horrible woman insulted me without cause. She practically called me a whore!"

Clara's heart skipped a beat when a shadow crossed Mr. Davies face. *Me and my stupid temper*, she thought. She only hoped he would understand.

"Matilda," snapped the other man, presumably the owner of the general store. "I heard some rather unscrupulous phrases escape your mouth as well." The girl's eyes widened and she promptly looked at her feet.

“Did you call Mattie a whore?” Mr. Davies asked, staring directly at Clara, even as she shrank into the dresses.

“I . . . not exactly . . . I didn’t use *that* word.” It was the truth, the half-truth.

Mattie’s head shot up. “She called me a diseased darling of the saloon!”

Clara felt dizzy and embarrassed. The pair of elderly men gawked openly at them over the checkers game, both of them smiling like fools. The hardness of Mr. Davies expression left her wishing she could just disappear, or somehow get the clock tower to rewind so she could redo the last few minutes. Anything to escape this horrible situation that wasn’t her fault. The day had been gloriously spent, amicably by Mr. Davies’ side, but now it was tainted by this . . . this . . . this dreadful girl named Mattie.

“Is that true, Clara?”

She lifted her chin, figuring she was in for it no matter what. And there was no sense looking like a scared fool in front of Matilda. “Yes, I did call her that,” Clara admitted. “But she mocked the condition of my dress and even *cursed* at me!

“Matilda Riley,” barked the other man, “Go wait for me in the back. I’ve warned you a thousand times to watch that tongue of yours.”

The girl shrank towards the back of the store, and Clara felt a little triumphant that her enemy would likely be punished. But Clara didn’t revel in those thoughts for long, because Mr. Davies grasped her upper arm.

“I’m sorry about my wife’s poor manners,” the man said. “She knows better than that.”

“Miss Sutton here knows better as well,” replied Mr. Davies, tightening his grip and glaring down at her with those menacing dark eyes. “Don’t you?”

Clara's eyes burned. This was so humiliating. The old men were still watching, and she stood in front of Mattie's husband while Mr. Davies scolded her like a child. She lowered her head and stared at nothing in particular. No way would she admit wrongdoing. "I was only defending myself."

"Miss Sutton may not be sorry now, but I assure you she will be sorry *later*," announced Mr. Davies, his not-so-veiled threat causing her stomach to twist into tight knots. "It was good to see you again, Henry."

"Look, I'm sorry about this unpleasantness. I hope you two still plan on coming over for dinner tonight," said the general store owner – Henry.

Clara gasped, which earned her another sharp look from her "guardian." No way could she sit through dinner with that awful Matilda woman!

"Of course," answered Mr. Davies. "We're looking forward to it."

Clara soon found herself being led brusquely through the street. She knew William Davies intended to spank her, but she planned to defend her behavior towards Matilda once in the privacy of the hotel room. She hadn't run away and she hadn't cursed, nor had she raised her voice either. He couldn't spank her . . . he just couldn't! Not when they'd had such a lovely day together. It would ruin *everything*!

The saloon wasn't very crowded. A few men sat at the bar, keeping to themselves and nursing whiskey. Four men sat at a table with cards spread around, and a scantily clad brunette with dark red rouge was draped unceremoniously over one of the man's arms. Clara walked ahead of Mr. Davies, towards the curving staircase, and towards her potentially painful fate. Absolute dread overcame her once their room was in sight.

She gulped and another wave of dizziness hit her, and she winced as Mr. Davies shut the door and bolted the top. His eyes smoldered as he stood with his thick arms crossed over his broad chest.

“I didn’t do anything wrong . . .” she started to say, but he was swift to interrupt.

“You didn’t do anything wrong?” he barked. “You insulted the store owner’s wife. And Henry is a good friend of mine. How do you think your behavior reflects on me?”

“First of all, my behavior – good or bad – doesn’t reflect on you at all. I said it last night and I’ll say it again – I’m not your daughter or your wife,” Clara said boldly. “And second of all, she insulted the way I’m dressed. This was my mother’s dress. I know it’s a little worn, but I can’t give it up just yet.”

“Be that as it may,” he began, “I heard you say some pretty nasty things to Mrs. Riley. Implying that a married woman is a whore is inexcusable. Surely you know better?”

“Third of all,” Clara continued, “I didn’t raise my voice or curse back at that woman, even after she yelled and cursed at me.”

“You can stand here and try to argue your way out of this until kingdom come, but the fact is – your behavior in the general store was atrocious.”

She felt her lip began to quiver, no matter how badly she tried to keep her emotions under control. Not only did Mr. Davies not understand, but he intended to spank her . . . again.

“Men!” she hissed. “You don’t understand anything! She was so *mean*!”

“Miss Sutton,” he said quietly, “I want you to come here.” He stood near the bed, waiting.

Clara knew there was nowhere to escape, and no amount of justifying her actions would get this man to budge. Before she realized it, she found herself moving towards Mr. Davies,

preemptive tears forming in her eyes. She was awfully sore from the previous night's spanking, and with her newly discovered attraction to William Davies, she feared this spanking worse than the first one. Surely, the embarrassment would surpass the pain. Any yet . . . she still feared the pain, the stinging slaps that would soon rain down over her bottom.

"Good girl," he said, taking Clara by the hand. A sob escaped her throat as he sunk into the bed, pulling her across his lap.

To Clara's complete mortification, Mr. Davies pushed her dress up and pulled her pantaloons down to reveal her recently reddened bottom. Her flesh was dark pink across all the areas he'd covered the previous night. She was panicking, but she dared not move. A combination of fear and embarrassment kept her frozen in place. "Please, Mr. Davies," she begged. "Please don't spank me."

"Are you sorry for what you said to Mrs. Riley?" he asked, resting a hand on her bare, pink skin.

She was silent, thinking. Of course she wasn't sorry. That woman had been awful and had deserved every insult thrown her way. Mr. Davies didn't understand anything!

"That's what I thought," he said. He shifted her further across his lap, and Clara buried her head into the coverlets. "I expect you to keep quiet for this spanking, Miss Sutton. I also expect you to keep still. No kicking your legs like last time. Do you understand?"

"Yes sir," she said, her voice muffled against the bed.

His punishing hand cracked down across her bare flesh again and again, swift and stinging. Smack after smack. The noise filled the room and echoed inside Clara's head.

As the burn built up, she bit the coverlets to keep from screaming out. She wanted to hate Mr. Davies, but her newfound attraction to him left her horribly conflicted and more fiercely

embarrassed than during the first spanking at his hand. No longer nearly a stranger and the neighbor she'd known in passing years ago, he was familiar and close to her in a way that was both frightening and exciting.

Clara gasped and lifted her head up. Her bottom stung something awful, and she feared losing control. She longed to escape Mr. Davies by kicking off his lap. His large hand swiftly pelted the lower arch of her bottom, stroke after stroke landing upon the area where her mounds curved into her thighs. Her back heaved under heavy, muffled sobs.

Mr. Davies paused suddenly, his hand resting upon her stinging orbs. "Regardless of what Mrs. Riley said to you, you had no right speaking to her so cavalierly. Tensions have been high around these parts since the fighting between the ranchers. One slip of the tongue to the wrong person could land you in heaps of trouble," he scolded. "Mrs. Riley did wrong and I know Mr. Riley will punish her for it. But I am disappointed that you failed to hold your tongue in cheek like the respectable lady I know your pa and aunt raised."

An unanticipated pang of regret overcame Clara, catching her off guard. She sobbed even harder. Mr. Davies was right. Again. And she deserved to be punished at his hand. Again.

"I – I'm sorry," she wept. "I'm so sorry, Mr. Davies." And she was truly sorry for her atrocious behavior. The horrible things she'd said to Matilda, deserved though she felt they were at the time, had been detrimental to her character and painted her pa and aunt in a bad light. Not to mention the trouble it caused for Mr. Davies in front of his friend, the owner of the general store.

"Your spanking is almost over," he said gently, boldly caressing her stinging flesh for a few moments before – smack! She desperately struggled to keep still as he delivered a series of

sharp slaps across her smarting bottom, one after the other, many hitting the same tender spot repeatedly.

Before she could comprehend what was happening, Mr. Davies pulled her up, arranged her dress, and held her upright in his lap while she cried repentantly. She was mortified and ashamed mostly, but a small part of her held a growing respect for William Davies.

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry,” Clara repeated over and over again, burying her face into his chest.

He held her gently, stroking her hair and whispering soothing words. “Shh,” he said. “I know you are. And I know I was hard on you, but you need to understand that I will never let you out of a punishment you’ve clearly earned.”

Clara was confused. The way Mr. Davies was talking sounded like he intended to . . . no. She couldn’t even think about that possibility! “I’m sorry I caused you trouble in front of your friend,” she said. “I promise I’ll behave the next few days until we’re back on my pa’s ranch. After that . . .”

“After that, you will still be subject to my authority, Miss Sutton.” His tone was matter-of-fact, as if he knew something she wasn’t privy to.

“As much as I appreciate you thinking you’ll have to look after me, I hardly think my pa would approve of his foreman taking my discipline into his own hands.” Clara tried sounding as humble as possible as she said this. She wasn’t bent on starting an argument with Mr. Davies, but the aloft manner of his reckoning left her grasping for straws.

He brushed a strand of errant hair away from her face, looking directly at her with those deep brown eyes of his. “Your father offered me your hand in marriage in the last telegram. And I intend to marry you, Miss Sutton.”

Clara was stunned, utterly stunned. It wasn't long ago that she'd hated Mr. Davies, even musing how much she would pity any wife of his. Shyly, she remained on his lap with a very sore bottom, trying to make light of the situation.

"Miss Sutton?" he asked, drawing a finger delicately along her neckline.

"Yes?" Her voice was a crackling whisper.

"I won't marry if you aren't willing to have me as a husband."

"Oh!" She gasped, searching his eyes for signs of sincerity. "It's not that . . . it's just . . . I'm surprised is all."

He lifted her chin up and leaned closer. "Well then, will you be my wife, Miss Sutton?"

Her heart contracted and she could barely breathe. There she was, in dangerously close proximity to the very attractive William Davies with a freshly spanked bottom, and he was proposing marriage. Despite how outraged she should've been that her father had taken it upon himself to offer her hand to a virtual stranger, a glowing sensation subsequently built within the confines of her chest.

"Yes," she whispered, smiling through her tears. "Yes, Mr. Davies, I'll marry you."

His strong smile stilled her breath, and he leaned forward until their lips joined tenderly, sealing the deal. Clara felt something curious shift beneath her bottom, but wasn't sure what it meant.

"We'd better stop now," he said after pulling away. "Or I won't be able to keep myself from plucking your innocence in broad daylight."

She blushed crimson while considering the meaning behind this comment and its connection to the stiffness below her reddened bottom. When a swelling glow between her legs surprised her, she fought the urge not to grind down shamelessly against Mr. Davies lap.

“Now,” he said, “let’s go over to Charles’ house for lunch.”

Quickly, she nodded and rose to her feet, casually straightening her pantaloons as Mr. Davies glanced into the street.

The sandwiches prepared by the clock tower keeper’s wife were heavenly, and the old couple was delighted to hear of the engagement.

“You leaving in two days time?” asked Charles.

“That’s right. The stagecoach bound for Buffalo arrives then. I figure after that it’ll be five more days until we reach the ranch,” answered Mr. Davies, giving Clara’s hand a tight squeeze under the table.

“Stay vigilant,” warned Charles.

“I plan to,” said Mr. Davies.

“Why?” asked Clara. “Is something wrong?” She looked at the worry spread across every face at the table, knowing she was left out of something.

William Davies turned to her. “Just the tension between the small ranchers and the large ranchers,” he said. “Has your father mentioned any of this to you before? About the problems arising from land disputes and cattle hustlers?”

Clara bit her lip, thinking. “Come to think of it, I did hear pa arguing with Andy a couple times recently. I never thought anything of it, until . . .” She felt uneasy, and suddenly worried about her pa’s small ranch.

Mr. Davies squeezed her hand again. “Well, sweetheart, I hate to sour our dinner conversation by talking of these troubles right now. I’ll tell you about it later.”

She nodded, and lunch continued with Charles dazzling the couple with the story of how he became the clock tower keeper. Clara only half paid attention, and instead dug deep into her

memory for tidbits of the arguments she'd overheard between her pa and Andy, the old foreman. No concrete memory surfaced, so she hoped Mr. Davies would soon explain.

"Tell me about the troubles with the large ranchers," Clara said, just moments after they stepped off Charles' front porch.

Mr. Davies led the way down the center of the dusty street with Clara on his arm. "The larger ranchers have long accused the smaller ranchers of branding calves during the spring roundup. Now, some of the larger ranchers are banding together and trying to control the distribution of land. A good deal of threats has been made on both sides. It's an unsteady situation."

"How do you suppose Andy figures into this?"

"I'm not sure, but I don't like the idea of your pa having enemies. He owns a fine ranch, but it's no match for any of those larger ones, especially those banded together."

Mr. Davies and Clara walked slowly around town for a few hours, making small talk with the locals and becoming better acquainted with one another. Clara's tummy fluttered each time Mr. Davies touched the small of her back, or met her blue eyes with his deep brown ones.

As dinnertime approached, Clara's nervousness grew. She didn't want to see Matilda or her husband. The incident in the general store was hard to forget, as was the painful spanking that had followed.

"William?" she asked, testing the waters by using his first name for the first time.

"Yes, Clara?" he prompted, squeezing her hand gently.

"Must we go to dinner with Mr. and Mrs. Riley?" She bit her lip, anxiously awaiting his response.

“Yes, we must,” he replied, taking a firm tone. “And the first thing you will do when we arrive is apologize to Mrs. Riley.”

“Apologize?” Clara hissed. “Apologize? You want me to apologize when she insulted me *first*?”

“Clara Sutton, unless you want to feel the sting of my hand again, you will do as I request,” he scolded, stopping to face her near the railroad track.

She avoided his burning eyes, opting to stare at her feet. “Yes, sir.”

He tilted her chin upwards between his large hands. “If you fail to apologize in a proper manner to Mrs. Riley, or if you say anything else questionable tonight, then you’ll have an appointment with my belt back in the hotel room.”

Clara stared back, completely horrified by the threat of a belt whipping. “I . . . I will do as you say,” she whispered, feeling terribly vulnerable under William’s piercing gaze. And they would soon be husband and wife!

Chapter 3

Mattie was waiting for Henry in the back of the store. She sat on a bench, crying softly and fearing the approaching confrontation with her husband. Obviously, he was angry, but that was still no reason for her to be sent away like some naughty child. Yes, she'd said unkind words to the girl near the dresses, but as far as Mattie was concerned, Clara had insulted her first.

Henry was taking forever, and Mattie wondered if he was purposely trying to make her anxious. Why had she been ordered to *wait* in the back of the store? They had only been married for a month, and this was the first disagreement to come between them. Mattie hated that Clara girl for being the cause of it, and would be happy to never see her again.

Mattie was usually the quiet type, but she'd been in a foul mood all day, and when *another* stranger had appeared in the general store with no intention of buying anything, it had been the last straw. She hadn't been able to hold her tongue, and now Henry was angry.

At least two hours had passed. Mattie had abandoned the bench for pacing, though it didn't calm her nerves in the slightest. Just when she didn't think she could wait another minute, Henry arrived, complete with a stern expression on his face. Her heart sank and an unfamiliar fear grew in her belly.

"Richard is minding the store until closing. We're going home. We have some things to *discuss*." His voice was cold like a winter morning on the eve of a heavy snow.

"Henry, there's no reason we can't talk here. What is it you want to discuss?" Mattie smiled and donned her best it-wasn't-my-fault face before sitting back on the bench. Maybe Henry was simply going to scold her. But why must they go home for it?

"Stand up," he said, his voice even colder than before.

Immediately, Mattie obeyed, practically jumping to her feet. The look in Henry's eyes was frightening. Truthfully, she hadn't known him very well before marriage, and she suddenly wondered about this new side of him. The fear in her belly grew and grew.

He moved closer. "Unless you want Richard, or any customers in the store, to hear me spanking your bare bottom, I suggest you march yourself home right now. I won't ask a second time."

Mattie stared open mouth with wide, frightened eyes. He wasn't joking. He meant to go beyond scolding – he was going to spank her! With tears in her eyes, she lowered her head and moved past Henry. *After* they were through the front door, Mattie intended to raise a good argument. But for now, she would obey rather than risk public embarrassment.

The burn of Richard's eyes as they left caused Mattie to wonder what Henry had told him. Did he know of Henry's intention to spank her? She shuddered.

On the way to their little house, Henry held her arm firmly. Even after stepping through the front door, he didn't loosen his grip. Instead, he hauled her towards the bedroom, his face a mix of determination and anger.

Mattie was trembling and searched for the right words. "Please Henry, please just listen to me."

He spun to face her, glowering down. "You insulted a customer who happened to be in the company of an old friend. I heard you yelling and cursing – in the middle of my store!" he roared, holding Mattie by both arms to face him.

She burst into tears. Henry was scaring her. Never before had she seen him so livid. And he'd promised to spank her. It was too much to handle. "P – please just let me explain. I'm so nervous right now."

“Go ahead,” he said, still not loosening his hold.

“Do you remember yesterday when those three women came in the store? The ones with all the children?”

“Yes.”

“Well they ran through the store, knocking things over. By the time they all left, it took me an hour to straighten everything back up again. And they didn’t even buy anything. When Clara said she wasn’t really looking to buy a dress, I just assumed she was the same type and I got angry. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” Mattie bit her lip to stifle her sobs. She’d just told Henry the truth, but would he understand? Would he still punish her?

“Matilda Riley, I don’t care about any of that. I care about the yelling and language I heard coming from your mouth. If a customer – or anyone else for that matter – makes you that angry, you’d best walk away or bite your tongue.”

“But she called me a *diseased darling of the saloon!*” Mattie was shaking harder. The thought of her new husband spanking her turned her guts to water. Not only would it hurt, but it would be completely humiliating. And on her bare bottom, nonetheless!

“You’re getting a spanking, Matilda Riley,” he said, confirming her worst fear yet again. “Take off your dress. Now.” He stepped back, waiting.

With her lip quivering, Mattie obeyed. Slowly, she removed her blue dress and placed it on the bed. She stood before Henry in white pantaloons and a chemise, but the intensity of his gaze left her feeling naked. “I’m sorry, Henry,” she said. “Please don’t spank me. I promise I won’t ever do such a thing again.” It was worth a try, though she doubted any amount of begging or apologizing would sway his decision. Never before had he seemed so sure of himself.

“Good. Keep that promise and this’ll be the first and last spanking I ever give you.” He pulled her forward, to the edge of the bed.

Mattie’s heart sank as Henry took a seat on the bed. She hadn’t been spanked in years. When he looked disapprovingly at her pantaloons, she knew what would come next.

“Take your pantaloons off. The chemise too.”

He laid both garments with her dress. Mattie didn’t understand why she must be completely naked, but she dared not argue. And as he pulled her across his lap, she vowed to never curse or raise her voice again. The spanking hadn’t even begun yet, but she knew this was one experience she never wished to repeat.

Henry positioned her across his lap with her tiny round bottom raised high. When he rested his hand upon the pale flesh of her mounds, she shuddered.

She felt his hand rise up . . .

. . . and then the spanking began with a round of stinging slaps falling across the center of her creamy white cheeks. Mattie couldn’t bare the pain. The blows were hard and the next one always fell quickly – sometimes in the same spot.

“Please, Henry. I’ll be good, I swear!” Mattie squirmed, but his hold was strong. And no amount of squirming kept the blows from landing, or from stinging.

Her bottom reddened quickly, glowing beneath his relentless hand. Slap! Slap! Slap!

“You are my wife, Matilda Riley, and you will behave like a proper lady,” he scolded while moving to spank the tops of her thighs. Mattie hadn’t expected that, and she sobbed even harder. The burning sting was unbearable, like a wildfire raging across her tender flesh.

“I’m sorrrrrrry!” she howled. And she was. Never had she been more ashamed and repentant. The fact that she was naked across her new husband’s lap only added to her shame.

She was still shy in the bedroom, and they'd only made love in the dark. Now it was daylight and she was without any clothes, her bottom presented high on his lap. Nothing could be worse.

When Henry finally rested his hand on her flaming bottom, she prayed the end was in sight. "After I let you up, I want you to bend over the bed. Alright?"

"Yes, sir." Mattie was suddenly afraid again. Obviously, her punishment wasn't over yet.

Henry lifted her up and stood, waiting for her to obey. Slowly, Mattie leaned over the bed, hating how high her sore bottom was displayed. When Henry slapped her thigh lightly and told her to spread her legs, she thought she would die of embarrassment. When she was finally bent over and spread to his liking, the air kissed her nether lips.

"Please don't, Henry," she said, knowing whatever was to come would be dreadful.

"I love you, Mattie," he said. "But I won't let you get away with such horrible behavior. Not ever. I hope this is the last spanking I have to give you for a while."

"But I'm so sorry," she cried, sobbing hard into the coverlet. And when she peered over her shoulder, her stomach twisted into a thousand knots. He was slipping the belt off his pants!

"I think you've earned yourself five strokes of the belt, Mattie. I want you to count them," he said.

"Yes, sir," she whispered, fearful but hopeful at the same time – at least the punishment was nearing the end. Although the anticipation of the first stroke was terrible.

"Good," he said, moving directly behind her.

The first stroke landed, and Mattie screamed. But then she remembered the counting. "One," she said, her voice hoarse whisper.

The next four strokes landed quickly, and she managed to count out loud, as embarrassing as it was. She sobbed uncontrollably into the bed after the fifth stroke. Her behavior had shamed *and* disappointed Henry at the same time. Suddenly, she cared more about his forgiveness than her throbbing bottom.

“Don’t move,” Henry commanded, after her sobs had quieted. She couldn’t see him, but she sensed him behind her. When she felt the tip of his manhood pressing between her nether lips, she immediately tensed.

“Relax, Mattie,” he said, his voice much softer. She obeyed, and waited for Henry to thrust his stiffness inside. When he did, she gasped and steadied herself. In the past, their lovemaking always happened *on* the bed, with Mattie on her back underneath her husband. This was new.

It wasn’t long before her natural juices flowed, and Henry built a steady rhythm. She gripped the coverlet as the enjoyable pressure grew and grew. When he pulled out without having spilled his seed, Mattie was empty and confused. Was he going to spank her again?

But his fingers soon stroked her lips, playing in her gathered moisture. She found herself moaning, yet she was still confused. Why was Henry making love to her right after punishing her?

Before she could speculate further, his fingers left her lips and delved into the pink hole above them. She gasped, completely shocked that Henry would touch such a private place.

“Shh,” he said. “Spread your legs farther apart.”

Though she was afraid, Mattie complied, spreading a step wider. He continued to explore this most private of areas, the stolen moisture of her woman’s lips guiding the way.

“I’m going to make love to you right here,” he said, pushing deeper.

Speechless and frozen with fear, Mattie lay bent over the bed, waiting for Henry's hardness to press into her clenching pink hole. When he finally thrust inside, she screamed from the pain, stretching around and accommodating his shaft. Despite her whimpering, he remained submerged and slowly built a rhythm. Mattie couldn't believe the depth of his reach, but when she forced herself to relax, some of the pain receded.

"Good girl," he said, and increased the pace of thrusts.

When his seed spilled inside her, they screamed in unison.

#

Mattie flitted about the house, cleaning and preparing dinner. Every move she made was a reminder of the punishment she'd recently endured at Henry's hand. A day ago, she would've never believed he would spank her, but she'd quickly learned that wasn't the case. He was a good, kind man, but it didn't mean he wouldn't discipline her if need be.

He had been gentle after her punishment and their lovemaking, she reminded herself. "I love you, Matilda Riley. And I forgive you," he'd said.

For some reason, as she remembered the naked spanking, her nether lips tingled and clenched involuntarily. Though the painful experience had been *very* humiliating, she couldn't stop thinking about Henry bending her over the bed. That part of the experience stuck out in her mind above all else – pain and pleasure at once.

When the door slammed, Matilda knew Henry had arrived home from checking on the general store. She left the kitchen to greet him, anxious to kiss the husband she loved.

"Dinner smells delicious, sweetheart," he said, holding her face between his hands. When he leaned down to kiss her, Mattie felt another tingle between her legs. Their lips met, urgent but restrained.

“Do you remember what we talked about?” Henry asked, taking a step back.

“Yes, sir. I remember.”

“Good. Now what are you going to do when Clara and William arrive tonight?”

Mattie paused. Henry’s face was stern, but she knew he was right. Her behavior had been atrocious. Poor Clara hadn’t deserved such an insult. “I will apologize.”

“Good.” Henry’s face hardened, just a bit, but it caught Mattie by surprise. “And what happens if you fail to apologize?”

Her heart raced. She couldn’t believe he was making her say it out loud. “I – I get punished.”

“How do you get punished?” he asked in a voice much deeper than Mattie was accustomed to.

Her eyes widened and her face burned. Apparently, the spanking was over, but the humiliation wasn’t. “I – I get a spanking,” she whispered, looking down.

Henry reached forward, lifting her chin up. “That’s right, Matilda Riley. You get a spanking on your bare bottom, a very long spanking.” He stepped forward, and Mattie felt even more vulnerable. “Is your bottom sore?”

“Y – yes, sir. It’s very sore.” It was the truth. The thought of having to sit down for dinner was frightful. What if Clara and William noticed her squirming?

“You haven’t been rubbing, have you?”

“No!” Matilda gasped. “I swear, I haven’t rubbed at all!” Henry had strictly forbidden her from rubbing her sore bottom, even after he left the house. Mattie had been so scared he would peek through a window that she hadn’t dared, not even for a second.

To her surprise, Henry smiled and relaxed his shoulders. “It’s alright. I believe you.”

Mattie fidgeted, and wished the conversation could move to another topic. But when Henry circled her and paused at her back, she feared the humiliation would never end.

“Pull your dress up,” he said.

She hesitated only a moment before stepping towards the dining room and raising her dress. Henry guided her towards the table, bending her over it and pulling the white pantaloons down.

“Spread,” he said. Instantly, she stepped her feet apart, shuddering as the air kissed her nether lips yet again. He knelt behind her, positioned so his breath fanned against her most private area. With great care, he kissed the inner flesh of her thighs, all the way up to the soft, quivering mound.

Mattie moaned and bucked, despite herself, as his tongue trailed along her secret lips. Easily, he located her bundle of nerves, which was swollen and protruding like an ornamental button. He lapped against it, expertly manipulating and milking it until she writhed upon his mouth with a wail of pleasure. Afterwards, Henry mounted her, spilling his seed inside her for the second time that day.

To her surprise, he slapped her bottom lightly after pulling out. “You’re still red,” he commented.

Mattie blushed, and was thankful he couldn’t see her face.

“Let’s clean up, and then I have an errand for you to run.”

“Yes, sir,” she replied, curious about the errand.

A few minutes later, Mattie found Henry on the porch, gazing at the pink-blue sky. He smiled and reached for her hand.

“I want you to take a plate of biscuits to Richard at the general store,” he said. “I also want you to thank him for all his help, especially for closing up the store tonight.”

“It would be my pleasure,” replied Mattie, relieved by his request. She wasn’t sure what she’d been expecting, but it would only take minutes to run this errand. Even though Richard probably suspected she’d gotten a spanking, since he had seen Henry dragging her from the store, she was determined to please her husband.

“Hurry along,” he said. “Clara and William will be arriving soon.”

“I’ll hurry,” Mattie called over her shoulder, already halfway to the kitchen.

Moments later, she was running across the street with the plate of biscuits for Richard, one of Henry’s closest friends. When the soft cotton of her pantaloons chaffed against the raw flesh of her bottom, she slowed to a walk. The ache below her waist was still a conflicted combination of pain and pleasure. And though she desperately hoped to avoid another harsh punishment at Henry’s hands, she anticipated the next time they would make love, even if she was bent over a table or the bed – and even if he entered that tight, previously untouched hole.

To her relief, there were no customers inside the general store. The old men were still playing their game of checkers, however, and they exchanged a knowing smile as she walked towards Richard.

“Good evening,” she said. Her husband’s friend looked up. “These are for you.”

Richard took the plate, smiling graciously. “Thank you, Mattie,” he said. “To what do I owe this pleasure?”

Matilda flushed. If only he knew! But then she remembered that he probably did, and she fought to control her emotions. “I wanted to thank you for your help watching the store today, and also for closing up. Henry and I both appreciate your assistance.”

Richard smiled again. "It was no problem . . . no problem at all."

Mattie returned the smile, and said goodbye, ignoring the pair of nosey old men as she left. Henry was waiting on the porch. She sunk gingerly beside him on the bench, wincing from her soreness, but felt a strong sense of closure. Things were right between them again, and things were . . . different. Somehow, she felt closer to the husband she hadn't known very well.

"I'm proud of you, Mattie," he said, putting his hand on her thigh.

For the thousandth time that day, she blushed. "I'll make things right with Clara, I promise. I'm sure she's a nice girl."

"That's what I like to hear."

"Can I ask you something?" Mattie asked, hoping she wasn't about to embarrass herself once more. When Henry nodded, she continued. "Why did you . . . I mean why did we . . . after you spanked me . . ."

"Are you wondering why I loved you *after* I spanked you?" A smile tugged at his lips, and he wrapped an arm around Mattie.

"Yes," she answered, looking down at her fidgeting hands.

"At first, I only intended to give you the punishment you deserved. The urge to love you came afterwards. I couldn't help myself from having you."

Though Henry's explanation wasn't very descriptive, she suddenly understood his meaning. "Thank you for . . . answering my question," she said, finally meeting his eyes.

"Let's get you inside to finish dinner now," he suggested. "And after our guests leave, I want you to meet me naked in the bedroom. Alright?"

"Yes, sir," she replied, feeling a gush of warmth sizzle between her legs. Yes, things were different between them, but in a way more wonderful than she would've ever imagined.

Chapter 4

Clara had expected Mr. and Mrs. Riley to live a small room in the back of the general store. But to her surprise, they lived in a little house nearby.

“Remember what happens if you misbehave,” William whispered in her ear just before knocking. A shiver ran down Clara’s spine as she imagined her future husband taking a belt to her delicate bottom. A hand spanking was bad enough!

“Welcome!” exclaimed Mr. Riley as he opened the door. The men shook hands and they were soon ushered inside towards a cozy dining room.

“You’re just on time,” said Mrs. Riley with a warm smile. “Dinner’s on the table.”

“It looks delicious,” said Clara, opting to complement Mrs. Riley while working up the nerve to apologize. Although one glance at William Davies’ stern face was almost enough encouragement.

“Clara?” he said, pushing his fiancé forward. “Was there something else you planned to say to Mrs. Riley?”

Clara flushed, completely embarrassed that William would publicly remind her of such a thing. She felt like a child being forced to apologize to a playmate. Finally, Clara looked directly at the other girl and said, “Mrs. Riley, I am truly sorry for the things I said to you earlier.”

The other girl looked uncertain, and Clara was suddenly worried. Hadn’t her apology been satisfactory? But when Mr. Riley nudged his wife towards both guests, Clara understood she wasn’t alone in some things. “Miss Sutton,” said Mrs. Riley, “I am also truly sorry for the things I said to you earlier. I hope we can be friends. And please . . . you can call me *Mattie*.”

Clara smiled, desperate to break the lingering tension. “I would like that, Mattie. And please . . . call me *Clara*.”

Both of the men straightened up. “Well,” said Mr. Riley. “I’m glad that’s out of the way. Women!”

Ignoring his comment, Clara seated herself – slowly and carefully – next to William at the oak table. Dinner looked marvelous. Fresh baked bread, boiled potatoes, tender carrots, and baked ham had never looked so good.

“My compliments to the cook,” said William after taking his first bite. “You’re a lucky man, Henry.”

“I know I am,” replied Mr. Riley, and Mattie blushed noticeably from both compliments.

Dinner at the Riley’s house was progressing smoothly, but Clara became more self-conscious as the evening wore on. Mattie was an excellent cook and kept a beautiful home. Clara wasn’t the best cook in the world, and back at the ranch Aunt Martha had done most of the cooking and housework. Adding to her fear of Mr. Davies stern discipline, Clara wondered if she would be able to satisfy her husband in areas aside from obedience.

#

“Are you alright?” Mattie asked as she handed Clara a wet plate.

“Huh?” Clara replied, definitely lost in thought.

“Are you alright? You look miles away.”

“Oh, I’m fine,” replied Clara, drying the plate before stacking it with the others.

“I know Mr. Davies punished you after what happened,” the girl confessed. “I’m truly sorry to have caused you any pain or embarrassment.”

Clara’s face burned. “How did you know?”

Mattie smiled. “Because it took you nearly as long to sit down as it did me.”

“Oh,” Clara said, happy there hadn’t been other dinner company besides the four of them. She recalled how earlier she’d hoped Mattie was punished, but now she felt only companionship and sympathy for the girl who’d met the same fate.

“Listen, Clara,” she said, shyly. “I think your dress is pretty. I really shouldn’t have said what I did, it’s just I . . . I get a little mad when customers move around things in the store and I have to clean up after them. I didn’t recognize you, so I figured you were just some young wife headed west to appropriate land. I – I’m really sorry.”

Clara smiled. “It’s forgotten, truly.”

Mattie brightened. “Good. Now let’s finish these dishes so we can bother the men.”

They giggled and set to finishing up the dishes. Afterwards, they joined William and Henry on the porch. William pulled Clara close to him on a bench. The sky was dimming and she suddenly dreaded another night in the hotel room. Last night they’d gone to sleep as virtual strangers. But tonight they were much better acquainted – and engaged! Her heart fluttered at the idea of sleeping so near to William Davies.

When the evening drew to a close, Clara knew she’d made a new friend in Mattie. Henry was a nice man, too. The four friends said their goodbyes, and Clara and William headed for the hotel. The moon was full and the air was warm. It had been a perfect night, aside from having to sit on a tender bottom.

William led Clara through the crowded saloon and up to their room. Clara immediately lit the lantern, while William opened the window to take advantage of the breeze. Clara stood awkwardly, knowing she had to dress in her nighttime chemise, but was too shy to ask William to turn his back.

Suddenly, he was at her side, kissing the smooth flesh across the V-neck of her calico dress. Clara was frozen for an instant, completely caught off guard. But she couldn't resist melting into his soft kisses, and ran her fingers through his dark hair and pulled closer.

Pressed against the wall, Clara felt the same tautness inside William's trousers that she'd felt earlier. A tingling sensation gathered between her legs, and she shamelessly pressed against that tautness, and returned Mr. Davies kisses wholeheartedly.

"I want to touch you, Miss Sutton," he whispered, running his hand between her thighs. Clara moaned as the tingling sensation built to a desperate throb. She wanted his hand between her unclothed thighs, touching her most private spot underneath the damned dress.

When William slipped his fingers under the band of her pantaloons, the first touch, skin to skin, left her gasping for more. Expertly and without restraint, he explored her moist center, tracing her woman's folds before plunging deeper. "William!" she gasped his name with pleasure, rocking upon his delving hand.

"Come here," Mr. Davies said, suddenly pulling Clara towards the bed with a passionate haze clouding his dark eyes. She followed, and made no protest as he removed her dress. When it was done, she stood before him in nothing but pantaloons and a thin camisole, anxious but eager for what was to follow.

While Clara had guarded her virginity as most self-respecting women did, she wasn't completely oblivious about what transpired in the marriage bed. Once, Mabel had confided a few things about her own wedding night, though the descriptions had been on the vague side. Whether it was because of Mabel's allusions or her own instinct, Clara ached to feel William's stiffness between her legs, deep in her pooling honey.

All of a sudden, Mr. Davies grasped her face between his hands, just as he had done earlier while scolding her. She stared back, completely entranced. Never had he looked more serious. “I know we’ve yet to say our vows, but what we’re about to do will make you my wife-in-truth. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Clara whispered, trembling with anticipation.

“This makes you mine, *forever*,” he said.

“Forever.” Her heart was in her throat, but she held the tears back.

“Husband and wife,” he said.

“Husband and wife,” she repeated.

What followed next was a flurry of clothes and shoes flying all over the room. In mere moments, William and Clara were naked and tangled together on the bed.

Mr. Davies pushed Clara down flat, trailing kisses from her neck to her belly, and reaching between her downy mound to swirl around in her gathering juices. She moaned and arched her back, hungering for his hardness to bury inside her.

“Turn over,” he said, his tone commanding. When Clara hesitated, he helped guide her onto her stomach.

“What – ?” Clara started to ask, but William was swift to interrupt.

“Shh.” His manhood pressed against her bottom as he leaned to whisper in her ear. “I want to get a good look at you. *And* I want to make sure I punished you thoroughly enough.”

Clara shivered, but remained still. William rose up and placed his hands across her buttocks, tracing the sore areas.

“Still red,” he commented, running a hand along the tender flesh of her thigh.

Though she was terribly embarrassed, Clara didn't protest. William was to be her husband, and that meant submitting to him in all things – including the bedroom.

“Now,” he said, cupping a mound in each of his hands, “Let's see how red you really are.”

Clara gasped as he pulled her bottom cheeks apart. Cool air rushed against her moist nether lips and the untouched hole above it. He held her like that for a while, inspecting her thoroughly. When he was apparently satisfied, he leaned down and whispered, “It's a good thing I spanked you hard enough the first time, Clara, otherwise I'm afraid I would have no choice but to take you over my knee right now.”

“But you – ”

Before she had a chance to finish her sentence of protest, William brought a hand sharply across her bottom. Clara was shocked and tried to squirm away. “You weren't about to argue with me, were you?” His tone was scolding, and he kept the punishing hand in place across her cheeks, holding her hostage while waiting for an answer.

“No, sir,” she immediately quipped, and ceased her squirming.

“I would hope not,” he replied in a lighter tone. “As my wife, Clara, you will submit to me *always*. If I think you need a spanking, or another spanking, you'll be getting one. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And,” he continued, “I won't always punish you with my hand. When the offense warrants it, I won't hesitate to give you a good belt whipping *or* even cut a switch. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” she replied automatically, although she dreaded the thought of feeling the sting of William’s belt or a switch.

“Good.” William guided her onto her back, positioning his throbbing manhood in the right place. Clara felt the rock hard appendage resting outside her aching crevice, begging for entrance. *This is it*, she thought, *husband and wife, wife-in-truth, forever.*

He kissed her gently and stroked her hair. “This will hurt – but only at first.”

Clara nodded, and briefly recalled Mabel speaking of the sting preceding the pleasure. William held her eyes as he thrust between the swollen, moist folds, deep inside her warm chasm. The pain was there, but it was nothing against the wave of pleasure that came from Mr. Davies steady thrusts. She marveled at the lantern light dancing across his hips as he built a rhythm inside her.

And it wasn’t long before Clara milled against William, grinding her center towards his thrusts. She was lost in pleasure, moaning and whispering the name of the man taking her maidenhead.

When William increased his momentum, Clara thought she would die of pleasure. She found herself bucking uncontrollably as an electric wave rushed through her insides, pulsating and contracting around Mr. Davies manhood. It was unlike anything she’d experienced before. Just as the wave began fading, William moaned and writhed lower, spilling his warm seed into her tight warmth.

As they lay entwined on the bed, he leaned over and said, “I love you, Miss Sutton.”

She stared back at her handsome husband-in-truth and replied, “And I love you, Mr. Davies.”

Clara fell asleep spooned in William's arms, laying naked across the coverlet until dawn peaked over the horizon. After breakfast, they bathed together in the clawfoot tub. William took great care, sponging soapy water over every inch of Clara's body. When his hands reached her bottom, a wicked expression crossed his face.

"Turn around," he said.

It didn't take Clara long to realize why William had demanded she turn around. Standing on her knees, she gripped the edge of the clawfoot tub while he positioned his jutting manhood between her waiting folds. There was no pain when he thrust inside, and the water splashed around their legs as William took her in a frenzy. She experienced the same electric wave as the night before, a thunderous release that rippled around William's manhood. Moments later, he withdrew, spurting his seed across her bottom.

#

The day passed quickly, and Clara mused it was probably because she was having such a wonderful time with William Davies. They visited with Henry and his wife, Mary Lou, for lunch again. And they walked the train tracks, holding hands and talking. When a rain cloud burst over them, they hurried back to town, laughing all the way.

"Might as well head for the saloon," William called over the rain. "It's nearly dinnertime, anyway."

"Bet you can't catch me!" Clara called, and bolted ahead. It didn't take long for William to pass her though, and he was soon close to the saloon.

As Clara hurried after him, she noticed a crowd of men exiting the saloon. William had slowed to a stop and was talking with one of the patrons. A heavy foreboding grew in Clara's belly. Something was wrong, she knew it.

“There was a big brawl,” William told her when she caught up. “One man was shot, but he’ll live. Go to the general store and wait for me there.”

“But – ”

“Now.”

Reluctantly, Clara jogged away, across the street to the general store. Mattie was inside, and the two women dusted shelves and talked quietly, waiting for William’s return. An hour later, he walked through the door with both his and Clara’s luggage.

“What happened?” asked Mr. Riley from behind the counter.

“Mick Branson’s son shot a man in the leg. Says the man was a rustler and stole some of his pa’s cattle in the last roundup. After that, everyone started throwing punches.”

Clara was shocked, but remained silent. She knew the name Mick Branson well, and his son’s name even better. Curt Branson had called on her a few times last summer, but she hadn’t liked him. He was quick to insult anyone and just as quick to start a fight. Plus, Clara suspected, he was only interested in acquiring her pa’s land. The corner of his pa’s large ranch met near the stream that crossed her pa’s property.

“Well the both of you are welcome to stay with us tonight.” Mr. Riley was taking his apron off and preparing to close up the store for the night.

“Yes, we’d be delighted to have you,” Mattie added with a smile.

“Thank you,” said William. “It’s safe in the saloon now, but I’m hesitant to stay the night there with Clara. People over there are skittish right now.”

And so it was settled. William and Clara stayed in the back room of Mr. and Mrs. Riley’s house. The bed wasn’t very comfortable, but it was a safe place to sleep, and Clara

didn't dare complain about that. She considered mentioning Curt Branson to William, but decided against it. She didn't want to spoil the evening.

They made love as quietly as possible, which was a veritable challenge, and fell fast asleep. Clara insisted on making breakfast in the morning to repay the Riley's hospitality. She made eggs and fresh biscuits, and was delighted that the food was edible. Everyone had seconds, even Mattie who normally ate like a bird.

The stagecoach came early, and the Rileys saw their friends off. Mattie hugged Clara so tight she thought she would choke. The girls promised to write one another. Clara hated to leave her new friends, but she *was* looking forward to starting a life with William. And she did miss her pa and Aunt Martha terribly. With high spirits, Clara stepped up into the stagecoach with William's help. But before she even took her seat, her spirits plummeted to the ground.

Curt Branson was grinning wickedly at her from his own seat in the stagecoach.

Clara felt her face flush, but she moved quickly to the corner across from him, slouching down as William joined her. The next four days would be awful, she feared. Just awful! Any regular man would be locked up right now for shooting a man in the leg, but Curt Branson came from money, so he had a reputation for doing as he pleased with the consequences damned. The sheriff was probably a couple of dollars richer this morning.

"Mornin' Miss Sutton." It was Curt, still with the wicked grin.

"Oh, Curt, I didn't see you over there," William replied when I didn't. Curt nodded in reply.

There were two men on Curt's side, and two women on William's side. Much more crowded than Clara's trip to Cheyenne just a few days ago.

“Mornin’ Mr. Branson,” Clara finally said, hoping her face wasn’t beet red. Instantly, she wished she’d told Mr. Davies about the past summer. If Curt Branson had the nerve to mention their failed courtship, it would be extremely embarrassing.

“You look as lovely as ever, if I may say so,” replied Curt. Then he looked at William. “Never thought I’d see you again.” His tone wasn’t malicious though, and Clara wondered what relationship – if any – William and Curt had had prior to the banking job back east.

William chuckled. “It’s been years since I’ve been to Buffalo, but I’m back for good.” He squeezed Clara’s hand. “I’m the new foreman at the Sutton Ranch, and I’m engaged to this beautiful lady as well.”

The wicked smile wavered, and Clara noticed a shadow cross Curt Branson’s face for just a moment. “Well, I’ll be damned. Congratulations.”

“Thank you,” Mr. Davies said.

The door to the stagecoach closed, and moments later the horses were galloping towards Buffalo. Clara wanted to disappear. No way could she stomach a four day ride with Curt Branson and his snide comments. It was all too much.

The stagecoach swayed and swayed. If not for the window seat, Clara knew the motion would’ve made her sick. She stared across the horizon at the mountains, never once letting go of William Davies hand.

It wasn’t long before Curt Branson was dazzling the other men and women with a story about surviving a night stranded in the snow three winters ago. William leaned against her ear and whispered, “Why didn’t you tell me you knew Curt Branson yesterday?” He didn’t sound angry, only curious.

Clara bit her lip. “I figured you knew that I knew him. His pa’s ranch borders my pa’s ranch. I’ve only met him a few times, though. I’m surprised he recognized me at all, it’s been so many years.”

“Years?”

“Yes, years,” she confirmed, although it wasn’t the truth. Clara had seen Curt Branson in passing in Buffalo quite a few times during the past year since their courtship ended. They always exchanged a polite greeting, and nothing more. Although Clara despised the way he grinned at her. It was creepy.

William leaned back just as the other five passengers roared with laughter. Clara had missed Mr. Branson’s punch line, but she doubted she would’ve found it amusing anyway. She dwelled on the lie she’d told Mr. Davies, but figured it was only a little white one. At least, she tried convincing herself it was a lie of no consequence. Telling William about her failed courtship with Curt Branson would’ve been too embarrassing. The man was both unpleasant and boisterous, a combination of traits that Clara didn’t care for. Admitting her failed courtship with Mr. Branson to anyone was something she shied away from.

The first day of travel turned out to not be so bad for Clara, despite the rough beginning. Curt Branson left her and William alone. The other passengers were nice and quiet, except for the times Mr. Branson told one of his ridiculous jokes. Although Clara suspected half of the times they laughed were only to humor Curt. *He’s not as funny as he’d like to think*, Clara thought with a twitch of bitterness.

When they stopped for a late meal, Clara watched the stagecoach driver and his hand water the horses in a stream. The passengers shared jerky and bread. Clara made it a point to stick close to William, but he inevitably wandered off to take care of personal business, and she

found herself alone. Curt must've sensed her discomfort, because he gave her another one of his wicked grins. Clara turned her back, searching for William, but he had stopped to talk with the two Buffalo soldiers who'd ridden on the roof.

"I'm more a man than he is, you know." It was Curt Branson, standing beside her and chewing a mouthful of jerky.

"Please . . . leave me alone," Clara said.

"He's going to be a foreman for a little itty bitty ranch. Hell, in a few years, that big ranch of my pa's is gonna be all mine. *His* pa disowned him. So what's he got?"

"I said leave me alone." Clara wanted to slap him, and found herself clenching her fists. William was still talking with the Buffalo soldiers. *Hurry up*, she thought, *please hurry up*.

"You're not married yet," he said. "How about a roll in the hay with me first? I bet that would change your mind."

Everything happened at once. Clara slapped Curt Branson hard across the face. William and the Buffalo soldiers, and everyone else, came running. Curt and William exchanged some harsh words and threw a few punches, and all the while Clara watched in horror. When the fight was broken up, the stagecoach driver sentenced Curt to riding atop with the Buffalo soldiers. The look he gave Clara before climbing up there could've frozen a boiling pot.

Clara was beside herself with guilt and worry. William Davies knew the truth about everything now. Her failed courtship with Curt Branson *and* subsequently, the lies she'd told earlier in the day. She was half-scared Mr. Davies would turn her over his knee right there.

Once everything was settled and the passengers boarded again, the stagecoach took off. This time, the constant swaying made Clara sick from the get-go. She felt anger emanating from

Mr. Davies. Every time she glanced his way, his jaw was set and his eyes smoldered. After a virtual eternity, he leaned close to Clara's ear.

"You lied to me, Miss Sutton." His voice was cold.

"I know and I'm sorry," she whispered back.

"Why didn't you just tell me about you and Curt Branson immediately? It makes no difference to me."

"He's a nasty man," she replied. "I was embarrassed about our brief courtship."

"You could've told me immediately and this fight would've never happened. I wouldn't have left you alone for a second. But now, because of your *lie*, tensions are high and we've got three more days of traveling until Buffalo."

Clara bit her lip and felt hot tears pooling in her eyes. "Please don't be angry with me, William. I'm so sorry." She glanced around to make sure none of the passengers were paying them any attention. The women were doing needlework and the men were apparently asleep in their seats.

"I have half a mind to punish you right now, Miss Sutton."

Clara's eyes widened. "Oh, please, Mr. Davies – not in front of all these people."

He leaned closer. "If you *lie* to me again during this trip, or misbehave in any way, I will not hesitate to spank your bare bottom, regardless of where we are. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir." Her stomach was a ball of knots. William had caught in her a lie. The disappointment in his eyes stabbed at the center of her heart. She was so ashamed.

"And, Miss Sutton," he added, "I think you know very well that your first night back in Buffalo is going to be a painful one. Lying to me in any form is unacceptable."

“Yes, sir.” And though Mr. Davies hadn’t said it directly, she knew she would get a taste of his belt.

Three uncomfortable and tiresome days later, the stagecoach galloped into Buffalo in the late evening. William got them a room above the saloon, figuring it would be best to travel to her pa’s ranch in the morning.

When they reached their room, luggage in hand, Clara knew it was time to face her punishment. The door clicked behind Mr. Davies. After gathering up her courage, she turned around just as William decisively slipped off his belt.

Chapter 5

The sound of William's belt snapping across her bottom was one Clara would not soon forget. Bent over the bed, she was wearing nothing but her thin camisole, spread wide with her face buried in the covers. "I'm sorry I lied!" she sobbed, praying the belt whipping would come to an end.

William caressed her stinging flesh with one hand and said, "I know you are. And your punishment is almost over."

Clara braced herself for the next and last round, and whimpered as ten more strokes landed in quick succession . . . snap, snap, snap.

"Come here," William whispered, pulling her close on the bed. She cried against his chest, mumbling incoherent apologies and promises to be good. "Shh . . . you're forgiven, sweetheart."

With the utmost care, he stroked her blond hair and wiped tears from her cheeks. When she was finally calm, William dressed her in her nighttime chemise before tucking her in. The moon was full in the window, and it was almost midnight. Clara fell fast asleep, spooned in William's forgiving arms

Morning brought buckets of much needed rain, and Clara and William were quite soaked by the time they arrived at her pa's ranch courtesy of Benjamin Smith's wagon. They rushed towards the house carrying their luggage, and the door opened up right away. Aunt Martha's old collie, Maggie, was barking up a storm from the inside, announcing their visit. Without having time to be nervous, Clara ran straight into the house she'd run away from just days ago.

Aunt Martha wrapped her arms around Clara the moment she dropped her luggage. “Oh, my sweet girl, we’ve missed you so much. And we’ve been so worried about you.”

“I know,” Clara replied shyly. “Where’s pa?”

“Someone cut one of the fences last night. He’s out fixing it with Corey, but he should be back any minute.”

“In the rain?” Clara asked.

Aunt Martha laughed. “You know your pa, rain or sunshine, it don’t matter to him. Although I can’t say Corey looked too pleased.”

Clara smiled and reached towards William. “Aunt Martha, do you remember William Davies?”

“How could I forget?” She wrapped her arms around William. When she released him, she said, “Well, is it true? About you two gettin’ married?”

Clara blushed and William smiled, reaching for her hand. “As soon as we can,” he said.

The old woman clapped her hands delightfully and urged them further inside. An hour later, when they were unpacked and wearing dry clothes, Clara’s pa walked through the door with Corey.

William immediately reached for Clara, seemingly aware of her nervousness. She waited for her pa to meet her eyes, and his expression was stern when he did. “Good to see you again, William. And welcome,” he said, walking past Clara and upstairs, presumably to dry off.

“Don’t worry about him,” Aunt Martha said. “He’s hurt, but he’ll come around.”

Clara stared up the stairs, hoping her aunt was right. William placed a kiss atop her head, and left to join Corey in the barn. The rest of the day passed slowly and awkwardly. Clara’s pa,

Emmet, was friendly with everyone but her. In fact, he wouldn't even glance in her direction. The silence was killing her. It was a punishment far worse than any other she could imagine.

After dinner, William found her crying behind the house. The rain had stopped hours before, but her feet were soaked from the ground. "Clara . . ." he said, pulling her close.

"Doesn't he know how sorry I am?" she asked. "He won't even look at me!"

William hugged her tighter, and pulled back to brush strands of errant hair away from her small face. "You're his only child, Clara, and you ran away. He's probably afraid you're fixing to run off again *or* that you don't really want to be home."

"But we're getting married soon, why would I run off?"

"He's in the kitchen right now. Alone. Aunt Martha's already asleep and Corey's helping Edward McDonald fix a fence."

"Another broken fence?" Clara thought of the arguments between the large and small rancher and about Curt Branson. Her stomach twisted. "Does this have anything to do with the large ranchers?"

The darkness on William's face answered her question before he even spoke. "Most likely. And your pa says Andy is working for the Branson's now. And Branson is accusing your pa of rustling calves." He paused, and Clara feared for what was coming. "Branson's demanding payment, but your pa is refusing, and rightfully so. I know Emmett's too smart to rustle cattle. Not when he's got the Branson Ranch bordering him on the north."

Frowning, Clara considered this new information. Her pa had had enough to worry about without having to deal with her running away. The courage to apologize and ask for his forgiveness materialized at once, and she backed away from William. "I'm going to talk to my pa now."

He smiled. “Good luck, sweetheart. I’ll meet you on the porch after I’m done in the barn.”

After a stolen kiss, Clara marched around the house with purpose. She needed to make things right, finally. Thank goodness William was there to provide guidance; sometimes she needed a push in the right direction – especially when it came to admitting her mistakes.

Emmett Sutton sat at the kitchen table, nursing a shot of whiskey and staring at nothing in particular. Clara entered slowly, waiting for him to acknowledge her presence. When he said nothing, she took a deep breath and sunk into the chair across from him.

“Pa?”

He looked at her, accusation in his eyes, but he only opened his mouth for another drink.

“I know you’re angry, pa. You have every right to be.” She saw his eyes lighten, and hoped she had his attention. “I want you to know how sorry I am that I ran off. It had nothing to do with you or Aunt Martha. I love you both, and I missed you both terribly while I was gone.”

“Then why did you go?” His voice was steel.

“All the reasons in my letter were the truth. I just wanted to see the east coast. I felt trapped that I’d rarely left Buffalo. And I was afraid you’d make me marry some rancher’s son I barely knew.”

“But here you are . . . back at the ranch and about to marry some rancher’s son.” He poured another drink.

“Yes, I am. But I swear to you pa, I’ve never been more happy. I love William. Trust me, I won’t be thinking about running off again. There’s more for me here than anywhere else.”

The rest was just closure. When Emmett Sutton rushed to embrace his daughter, she knew she possessed his forgiveness. Afterwards, they talked about the cattle wars and Andy’s

betrayal. Clara was overjoyed that she'd mended her relationship with her pa, but she was fearful for the ranch.

Later on the front porch, William joined Clara and they gazed at the moon and stars, quite content just to be snuggled close on the porch swing.

"The guestroom is all ready for you," Clara said. "Although I wish I could share your bed tonight."

William gave her a wicked smile. "I meant to tell you earlier behind the house . . ."

"Tell me what?"

"Your father agreed to a wedding in one week – in the case that you haven't run off again." He narrowed his eyes as if he was scolding her, but a smile tugged at his mouth.

Clara giggled with delight and planted a kiss on William's unshaven cheek. "Why would I run off? My home is right here," she said, placing a hand against his broad chest. Their lips met tentatively at first, savoring the sweet moment. But it wasn't long before the kiss became bruising, and arousal flooded Clara.

A cool breeze swept across the plains as they sped through the darkness towards the barn, and made love urgently in the hayloft.

#

Four days before the Saturday wedding, Clara sat at the kitchen table, finishing a letter for Mattie. She wished her new friend would be able to attend, but understood it was too short notice, even if Mattie and Henry would've been able to leave the store. Corey, one of the ranch hands, had mentioned he was going into town this morning, so Clara rushed towards the lodging house with the letter in hand.

No one answered the door, so she looked around and saw William exiting the barn.

“Mornin’ sweetheart. What’s that?” He was still unshaven, and Clara fought the urge to touch his curious stubble.

“Oh, just a letter for Mattie. I was hoping Corey could take it into town today. A stage comes tomorrow morning, and I thought it would be nice for the letter to go out then.”

“Sorry, sweetheart. Corey left an hour ago.”

Clara fought her disappointment. But then an idea burst into her mind. “Why don’t you ride to town with me on our wagon? You could meet my friend, Mabel. She lives in town.”

The twinkle left William’s eyes, and appeared regretful before even opening his mouth. “Sorry, but I’ve got to shoe two of the horses. And your pa’s checking the southern border fences, but I’ve got to check the northern border before lunchtime.”

“It’s alright, I understand.” She moved towards the barn. “Could you help me with Molly on the wagon,” she asked, gesturing towards her favorite horse. There was no good reason she couldn’t go into town alone. She’d done it before on many occasions.

“Clara, you are not to leave this ranch alone. Did you forget about the fight with the Branson’s?” His eyes were darkened, his expression stern.

“I’ve been driving the wagon into town alone since I was thirteen. I can handle myself,” she said angrily, continuing towards the barn. She was beyond annoyed that William would dare forbid her from leaving the ranch. Sure, Corey would be sure to tell Mabel about the wedding, but Clara wanted to make sure Mattie’s letter made it on tomorrow’s stagecoach to Cheyenne.

“Clara Sutton, unless you want a spanking, you’ll stop this right now.”

Completely mortified, Clara looked around to ensure no one had overheard William’s threat. To her relief, Aunt Martha and none of the ranch hands were anywhere in sight. “How dare you try to embarrass me!” she shouted, and marched straight into the barn near Molly’s

stall. If William wouldn't help her hitch Molly to the wagon, then she'd saddle the horse herself and ride into town that way.

"I'm warning you . . ." a low voice said from behind, just as Clara brought down Molly's saddle from the post.

Clara spun around like lightening. "Don't you have a fence to go check?" she drawled, rolling her eyes as she turned to open Molly's stall.

What happened next was a flurry of motion. William grabbed the saddle away, placing it back on the post. Clara followed, trying to snatch it back, but was pulled towards a barrel in the corner of the barn. Swiftly, William pushed up her dress and pulled her pantaloons to her flailing knees. He pinned her firmly in place and rained a quick succession of slaps across her bared flesh. Completely infuriated, Clara shrieked curses and attempted to writhe off his lap. This was *her* home. She wasn't about to let William dictate whether or not she could go into town.

"Let me up! Let me up, NOW!" she screamed.

But William only held her more firmly in place, delivering a series of especially painful blows to her upper thighs. "We've talked," smack, "about the dangers," smack, "surrounding the small ranchers," smack, "again and again, Clara," smack.

Clara's struggles lessened, but she didn't answer. When the pain became unbearable, she finally gave way to tears. When William didn't ease his pace of slaps, she cried even harder.

"Please," she finally said, "Please stop." Her bottom was aglow, just as it always was after enduring a spanking at William's hand. The man knew what he was doing.

To her surprise and great relief, William paused with his hand covering her reddened bottom. "Clara, I'm not refusing to let you travel to town because I feel like being mean.

There's a damn good reason you shouldn't leave this ranch alone. Branson's men have threatened to lynch people during the past few weeks. Lord only knows what they'd do to you."

In her stubbornness, Clara hadn't thought of it that way. The guilt, along with overwhelming remorse, crashed down on her, and she sobbed harder. "You're right," she managed to say through her crying, "William, I'm so sorry." She waited, each second seeming to last an entire day, for his response. Most of the time, William waited for her apology before driving the point home with a few more hearty slaps across her most tender areas.

When William began massaging her punished backside, running his hand in light circles, she managed to calm down a little. "If you leave this ranch without my knowing, Clara Sutton, you'll be getting a firm dose of the riding crop."

Clara shuddered. She imagined that would be far worse than the belt – and that had been the most painful experience of her life. "I promise."

"Good," he said, easing her up.

After she fixed her pantaloons and dress in place, William pulled her close. They stood like that for several minutes, just enjoying the closeness. Clara's head was nestled against William's chest, and the sound of his beating heart soothed her soul. The next couple of weeks would be difficult, but they would manage through. Clara vowed that she would do her best to obey William and lessen his load.

"Why don't you go help Aunt Martha with lunch," he suggested, pulling back just slightly. He brushed the remnants of tears away and kissed her forehead.

"Yes, sir," she replied, and left him to his work. Back in the house, Clara helped prepare lunch while Aunt Martha talked her ear off about the approaching wedding.

When Emmett Sutton, William, Corey, and the other two ranch hands walked in for lunch, both women stopped what they were doing and exchanged a worried look. Something was wrong. All three of the men looked paler than usual.

“Trouble with the fences?” Clara asked after Aunt Martha said the blessing.

All the men looked at Emmett Sutton. “Tell her what happened, Corey,” he said.

The young man looked around the table uncertainly, and Clara’s stomach tightened at the prospect of bad news. “The Branson clan rounded hung three men right outside of town last night. Two hands from the Winston Ranch and the other was a businessman from out of town.”

“Lord have mercy,” Aunt Martha said, hunching forward.

“Why?” Clara asked, her voice almost hoarse.

“The Bransons accused the Winstons of rustling their cattle. And the businessman, well I think he was in the wrong place at the wrong time,” said Emmett.

“But the Bransons accused you of rustling too . . .” Clara’s voice trailed off. An uneasy silence loomed over the table.

“Yes, which is why we all must stick together. No one goes to town alone. No one goes near the borders of this property alone. We stick together and carry weapons.” Emmett finally took a bite of bread. “Does everyone understand that?”

Clara, Aunt Martha, and all the men mumbled their agreements.

The days before Clara and William’s wedding passed tensely and slowly. Every time the men rode off to check the fences, Clara was beside herself with worry. She tried to busy herself helping Aunt Martha in the kitchen. She also took on most of the cleaning chores inside the house.

On a beautiful Saturday morning in August, Mabel and her husband, Donald, arrived with the preacher. Clara peeked out her bedroom window when she heard them coming, and her heart soared. It felt like she hadn't seen her best friend in years, though it hadn't been more than two weeks.

Mabel found Clara upstairs, and the two women embraced. "You look ready to pop!" Clara exclaimed, holding a hand against Mabel's stomach.

The other girl smiled. "The doctor says any day now," she said. "Although Donald says the child is waiting until Christmas." They laughed at that.

Mabel helped Clara get ready. She wore her mother's wedding dress, which was a beautiful white chiffon trimmed with lace and ruffles. Mabel fixed her hair and placed the veil just right, and Clara stared at herself in the mirror, wishing her mother could've been there.

At eleven O'clock that morning, Clara's father brought her outside to William, who was waiting in a suit he must've borrowed from someone. In any case, he looked as handsome as ever. They exchanged vows in the wide-open field behind the house, and ate lunch outside on a long table the ranch hands had recently refurbished. It was a small gathering, but it was just how Clara had pictured it. She had never been happier. She was Mrs. Clara Davies.

When the sun waned and the guests departed, William helped Clara move her things into his room. The downstairs guestroom was an isolated addition to the house and much larger than her upstairs bedroom. Even though Aunt Martha and Emmett shared the ranch house, they would have all the privacy they desired.

As William helped the hands with a few late night chores in the barn, Clara prepared for bed. With a mischievous grin, she crawled under the covers wearing absolutely nothing.

Clara was humming to herself as she gathered eggs from the henhouse. It was late August and the mornings were becoming cooler, but the weather wasn't too wicked yet. As she put another egg into her basket, she imagined curling up with William in front of the fire during the frigid winter and smiled. Just as the sun peeked over the horizon, she rounded the barn and gasped.

There, on the tulip poplar beside the ranch house, an effigy hung by a rope tied around its neck. *Someone* was threatening her family. And she knew that *someone* was Curt Branson. As Clara reached the house in search of William and her pa, a group of riders appeared over the field, bounding towards the house.

Maggie stood on the porch, barking furiously. Clara couldn't be sure, but she figured there were at least a dozen men, if not more. She burst into the house with a flurry of shouts. William and Emmett were in the kitchen and came running with Aunt Martha not far behind. Out on the porch, Corey and the other ranch hands joined them. The men loaded their shotguns, and as the riders neared, William turned to Clara. "I want you inside with Aunt Martha. Now."

Without a word, Clara obeyed, pulling her aunt through the door. They hovered behind the curtains, growing more anxious by the moment. The riders stormed past the barn, kicking up a cloud of dust along the way.

"Most of them are from the Winston Ranch and the Davies Ranch. That's Karl and Pete in the front there, and William's pa, John," Aunt Martha said. "And . . . look! There's Andy."

The women watched through the window as the men conversed. The riders carried shotguns, and the whole experience left Clara frightened. Obviously, the riders were headed somewhere and meant to use those weapons. It wasn't long before Corey ran into the barn with

Emmett and a few others, and William opened the door. Two of the ranch hands, Paul and Frank, followed him inside.

“What’s going on?” Clara was at her husband’s side immediately.

“A dozen of the Winston’s cattle turned up dead this morning. A few other small ranchers were threatened last night.” His gaze went out towards the hanging effigy. “We’re riding to the Branson Ranch to solve this problem once and for all.”

Clara paled and Aunt Martha reached for her hand. “Must you go too?”

“Yes,” William answered firmly. “Paul and Frank will stay here with you. The rest of us are going.”

In an effort to be brave, Clara nodded her understanding and blinked back tears. “Please, William, be careful.”

“Stay here until we get back. Don’t leave the house for any reason.”

“We won’t,” she said. “I promise.”

William kissed her and ran out the door to the saddled horse awaiting him. Clara stood at the window, watching the men she cared most about ride east towards the Branson Ranch.

A single tear rolled down her cheek and she whispered, “Please let them come back.”

Chapter 6

Hours had passed since Clara had watched William, Emmett, Corey, and all the others ride off towards a probable shootout. Not once had she even considered abandoning her vigil at the window. Aunt Martha had brought her a chair, along with lunch and dinner. Paul and Frank rode the perimeter of the house and barn twice an hour.

But William, Emmett, Corey, and the others hadn't returned.

A coldness clutched Clara's heart, and her stomach twisted into a heavy ball. She feared the worst for her husband and pa, and for the others too. The Branson's had more money and more hired hands. It would be a miracle if any of the riders she loved returned. Curt Branson was a nasty man who held no reverence for the lives of others or for the law.

"Coffee." It was Aunt Martha's voice, and the old woman pushed a steaming cup into Clara's hands. "I figure you won't be sleeping until they come back."

If they come back, Clara wanted to say, but she dared not voice her fears. Feeling helpless in the face of danger was bad enough.

Paul and Frank refused to ride into town to fetch the sheriff, despite how often Clara begged them. "They'll be back before nightfall, just you wait, Miss Clara," Paul kept saying. They kept glancing through the window, as if they expected her to march out the door and ride into town herself. No doubt William had warned them to keep a close eye on her.

From her vigil at the front window, Clara could see Aunt Martha sitting at the kitchen table with her needlework with Maggie snoring at her feet. The old woman was up well past her usual bedtime. Paul and Frank were still on the front porch, pacing impatiently. Suddenly, Clara

was angry beyond words. How could the four of them just sit back and wait for the riders to return?

Someone had to get the sheriff.

The sun would be setting soon, and night was inevitably approaching. Though she knew she was breaking her promise to William, Clara made her decision and hoped both her and William lived for her to regret it. If Paul and Frank wouldn't seek help in town, then she would do it herself. Even if William found out, he would probably understand her reasoning.

"Goodnight, Aunt Martha," Clara said, peeking her head into the kitchen.

"Oh, are you calling it a night already?" The old woman looked surprised, but not suspicious, to Clara's immediate relief.

"Yes, I'm about to fall asleep at the window." She smiled at her aunt, hoping the old woman wouldn't discover her missing from her bed.

"Oh, well . . . goodnight, dear. I'm sure the men will be back by morning." Aunt Martha gave her a sad smile before picking the needlework back up.

Clara moved towards her downstairs bedroom, but walked past the entrance. There was a backdoor to the ranch house. If she could sneak past Paul and Frank, she could get Molly saddled and ride off as quietly as possible towards town . . . towards help.

An owl hooted nearby, and a shiver raced down Clara's spine faster than a train at full speed. She felt like a child sneaking out of the house as she gently closed the backdoor, except this wasn't some youthful indulgence. This was life and death.

Thanking God that Maggie was in the house, Clara began making a big loop towards the barn. Muffled voices reached her ears, along with the smell of tobacco. Frank always had a pipe

in his mouth, it seemed. She rounded a bush and crouched down, waiting. When she was sure no one had noticed her, she quietly jogged into the back entrance of the barn.

Molly was in her stall, and Clara quietly got her saddled. There was barely a bit of light left in the barn, and by the time she walked the horse slowly out the back, the sun was disappearing under the plains. Once she crested the small hill above the ranch house, she hoisted onto the saddle, arranging her dress so she could straddle Molly for a fast ride.

“We need to reach town fast, girl,” Clara whispered into the horse’s ear.

They took off.

Lightening bugs lit up surrounding fields like drifting stars, dancing around Clara as she rode Molly fast towards Buffalo. The moon was out, just barely. A few drops of moisture stung her face, a testament that the night sky was cloud-covered and threatening to rain.

Just as Clara crested another hill, she noticed a group of riders moving fast towards her. Through the darkness, it was difficult to count the number. It was also impossible to know whether they were friend or foe until she was up close.

A gunshot pierced the night, and Molly veered off the road, startled by the sound. Clara tried to rein the horse under control, but the riders were soon surrounding her.

“See who it is,” a voice shouted.

“Make sure he doesn’t have weapons,” another voice shouted.

It didn’t take long for Clara to realize these riders thought she was a man – an armed man and possibly an enemy. The faces were dark and more raindrops stung her face. “Get back!” she shouted. “I’m not armed. I was just on my way into town.”

“Clara?” A figure on a horse drew nearer, and it didn’t take long to realize who had just spoken her name.

It was William.

“Yes, it’s me. William? Are all of you alright? Pa?”

Her husband moved close enough that she could see the outline of his broad face. “Yes, we’re all here. Are *you* alright?”

Clara’s eyes swelled with tears. “Yes, I’m fine. I was just worried about all of you. What happened?” Relief filled her from her toes to her head. All the men she loved were alive . . . William, her pa, Corey . . .

“Why did you leave the house?” William’s voice was stern, and even though she couldn’t see the rest of the faces clearly, she felt as if every man was staring at her. The promise she’d made to William had been broken. Not only had she left the house, but she’d saddled a horse to ride into town.

“I . . . I was going to get the sheriff,” Clara finally answered, her gut twisting as she realized the level of trouble she was in.

A few of the men laughed, and Clara’s face burned. Obviously, they’d been able to take care of themselves. Not one of them had fallen, though she wasn’t certain if they had fought with the Branson’s or not.

“Come on,” William shouted. “It’s dark. Let’s all get home.”

With that, the rest of the men took off. William lingered on his horse as Clara eased Molly back onto the road. He didn’t speak to her through the journey home, and her nervousness grew and grew.

The Winston’s veered off towards their ranch, and when it was time for John Davies to leave, William rode up to him. Clara stopped Molly at a distance as they talked, and she secretly

hoped William was able to reconcile with his father. Maybe some good would come out of all this trouble.

When the riders from the Sutton Ranch reached home, William took Molly into the barn. Paul and Frank stared at Clara with surprise as she walked past them. With a mixture of relief and fear, she awaited her fate inside the bedroom she shared with William.

Though she wished to wait on the porch for William, Corey, and her pa to explain what happened with the Bransons, Clara knew William would punish her for disobeying him. And while she didn't think he would turn her over his knee right on the porch, she wasn't about to take that chance. William and the rest of the men would get the horses taken care of soon enough, and he would find his way to their bedroom.

From her place on the bed, Clara saw the doorknob turning.

Her stomach flipped.

When William closed the door behind him, a steady stream of tears was already trailing down her face. She moved towards him like lightening. He returned her embrace, smoothing her hair as she cried against his chest.

"Sit down, sweetheart, and I'll tell you what happened," William said, leading her towards the bed.

Clara sat, knowing that she wouldn't be sitting comfortably for long. But she listened closely as William explained the events that had unfolded at the Branson's and inside town. Andy had left the Branson Ranch after Curt had the three men hanged. After Andy sought refuge with the Winstons, a couple of the small ranchers banded together to have it out with the Bransons. But when the riders finally reached Mick Branson's Ranch, the old man was lying wounded in the barn. Apparently, he'd gotten into a quarrel with his son over the hangings,

which the old man didn't condone. So the riders, along with a few of the Branson ranch hands, went off to find Curt Branson to bring him to the sheriff. Eventually, Corey found Curt passed out drunk outside the saloon. The young man drug Curt Branson to the sheriff's office where he's locked up.

"What if he pays his way out like he did down in Cheyenne?" Clara asked, worried.

"He won't. Mick Branson talked with the sheriff and agreed the Buffalo soldiers could escort him to the railroad. He has an uncle in Virginia, so they're relocating him there. I think he knows better than to show his face in Wyoming again. If he does, then justice will truly be served . . . at the end of a rope."

Clara shuddered, but then she relaxed against William. The danger was gone. There hadn't been a horrible gunfight, as she'd feared. Curt Branson would states away, banished from Wyoming for good.

A thought suddenly occurred to Clara. "What happened with your pa?" she asked.

William's face brightened. "He asked me to take over his ranch."

"As the foreman?"

"No," he replied. "On a more permanent basis. His health is failing him, and he wants to move east with my brother. Randolph found a doctor in Boston he wants to try."

"So . . . the Davies Ranch will be all yours? We're moving there?" Clara couldn't believe it, but she wasn't upset. Instead, she was bursting with excitement. Their very own ranch!

"Yes, that's right. In four days, in fact." William leaned down to kiss her forehead.

"But . . . does my pa know?" Clara wondered who the new foreman would be on such short notice.

“Oh yes, it’s all taken care of. Corey will be the new foreman. He’s a little young, but I know he has what it takes. He’s engaged to a nice girl from town, so Aunt Martha will have plenty of help around the house.”

Clara brightened. A few hours ago, she doubted she’d ever see William or her pa again. Now, they were about to start a new life on their very own ranch – a ranch which happened to border her pa’s ranch. It was perfect. “This is all wonderful news, William,” she said, snuggling against his chest.

“There’s just one loose end to tie up,” William said, the sudden sternness of his voice taking her by surprise. She had almost forgotten that she’d disobeyed William. Almost.

“What’s that?” she asked, feeling weak under the rush of nervous anticipation.

“I specifically told you to wait *inside* the house, did I not?” William loomed over her, waiting for an answer to his rhetorical question.

“Yes, sir, you did” Clara replied. “But I was only riding to town. It’s not like I was riding towards the Branson’s place.”

“And what do you think would’ve happened to you if you ran into Curt Branson on the road?” His voice was edged with ice, and his eyes darkened.

Clara shrunk under his gaze and looked down. “I . . . I didn’t think about that. I was just so worried.” William stood up and absolute fear seized Clara. “I’m a fast rider,” she added.

“You’re not very fast on that skittish horse of yours,” he retorted. “It looked to me as if Molly was ready to throw you.”

Letting loose a sharp, defensive breath, Clara said, “Yes well, there was a dozen of you riding towards us. And someone shot off a warning shot. You can’t blame Molly for that.”

“You made the decision to sneak off the ranch with Molly,” William reminded her. “And you made the decision to disobey me in a potentially dangerous situation.”

Clara looked up at her husband with tearful eyes. “I know . . . and I’m sorry, but . . .”

“I am your husband, Clara,” he said, interrupting. “Tell me what happens when you disobey me?”

Struggling to breathe through the pounding of her heart, Clara whispered, “I . . . I get a spanking.” The anticipation was killing her. She wanted the whole ordeal to be over with, but William was prolonging her torture.

“That’s right, Clara Davies. When I tell you to do something – or *not* to do something – there’s always a good reason behind my judgment. It disappoints me when you fail to obey me, and rest assured, there will always be consequences when that happens. I love you and I want to keep you safe. Do you understand?”

Clara’s lip trembled and she wanted to sink into the bed. His gaze was so intense, even as she looked down she felt his disappointment burning into her. “I’m sorry,” she sobbed, burying her face into her hands. The realization of what she’d done came down upon her full-force. It was too much to bear.

“Stand up.” His tone wasn’t as hard as it usually was during a punishment.

Clara rose to her feet, and looked at William with pleading eyes. She was truly sorry, and while she didn’t want to be punished, she knew she deserved whatever William was about to give her.

“I want your clothes off,” he said, standing back to wait.

With uncertain eyes, Clara moved to take her dress off, but then she stopped. “All of them?”

“Yes,” he replied. “I want you naked.”

He stepped forward. “Because I told you to do it,” he said, looking her up and down. “And also, because I’m going to love you afterwards until the sun rises.”

Though she was both taken aback and relieved, Clara quickly removed her dress and underclothes. The air was cool against her breasts and her nipples hardened as she shivered, partly because of the temperature and partly because of fear.

As William pulled her over his lap, Clara realized this was the first time William had a reason to punish her since they’d been married. Somehow, it was more humbling now that they were husband and wife.

“I don’t like causing you pain or making you cry, Clara,” he said, resting a hand on her upturned bottom, “But when you disobey me, you deserve to be punished. And when you do something dangerous, you deserve to be punished. You deserve this spanking.”

A few silent tears escaped from Clara’s eyelids, and she buried her face into the covers. He was right. She deserved this spanking. Closing her eyes tight, she vowed to accept her punishment without kicking or begging. William was a firm husband, but he was a good husband, and she wanted nothing more than to make him happy and proud of her.

Smack! The first few slaps crashed down, quickly turning the pale flesh of her backside a deep crimson. It stung badly, just like every spanking at William’s hand had. Though it was terribly difficult to refrain from struggling against the sharp slaps, Clara managed to keep still even as William covered her thighs.

The room was filled with the sounds of Clara’s silky sobs and William’s hand smacking her bottom. “Your punishment is almost over,” he said, pausing. “I’m proud of you for keeping so still. These next few spans are going to hurt the worst, but I want you to be brave. No

kicking. No screaming out. Do you understand, sweetheart?” His voice was smooth like velvet, and Clara could only nod in response.

True to his word, the next few slaps were the most painful. Pushing Clara’s bottom higher in the air, he quickly covered the base of her bottom, sharply bringing his hand down upon the tender skin above her thighs. Clara bit her lip to keep from screaming out. When his pace increased, she held her breath.

“It’s over,” William finally said, pulling her into his lap. She cried until she didn’t think she could cry anymore. She cried because she feared William and the other riders would never return. She cried because she’d disappointed William. And she cried because of the spanking itself . . . sitting would be a veritable challenge for the next few days.

“I really am sorry,” she whispered after she was all cried out. “Do you forgive me?”

William pulled back and looked down at her. “Of course I forgive you, sweetheart.”

Clara smiled up at him, feeling at peace with the world. When William’s lips joined with hers, she melted into his gentle kiss. Keeping her firmly in his lap, he trailed his lips along her neck. She leaned back, welcoming his advances. It wasn’t long before she ached with urgency, desperate to feel him between her legs.

“Lay down on your stomach,” he whispered as he nibbled her earlobe. “It won’t hurt as much that way.”

Though it pained her to pull away for even a moment, Clara gingerly rose off his lap to lie on her stomach. From over her shoulder, she watched him undress. Naked and gloriously aroused, he nestled his hardness between her bottom cheeks.

“Lift up . . . just a little,” he said, guiding her. Lightly, he trailed kisses down her back, and stopped with his hands on her bottom, gently rubbing the tender, crimson flesh.

Clara's urgency increased, and she pushed her bottom up higher to meet William's entrance. He slid himself into her warm center, increasing his pace after a few careful thrusts, calming Clara's urgency even as she ached anew. She gripped the pillow and moaned lightly, enjoying the new position underneath William.

After he cried out, spilling his seed deep within her walls, he collapsed on the bed. Clara draped a leg over his and curled against his broad chest, breathing in his scent.

William stroked her hair, and placed light kisses on her hands. She smiled secretly, remembering how much she'd initially disliked William Davies. He'd seemed so bossy, and he'd single-handedly prevented her from boarding the train bound for the east coast.

"What's so funny?" William asked.

The secret smile evaporated and she stared back, embarrassed. "Oh, nothing's funny," she confessed. "I'm just . . . very happy."

"That makes two of us," he said, pulling the blanket over them both. The sun peeked through the curtains as they finally drifted off after the longest night of Clara's life.

Still on her stomach, and quite content in William's arms, Clara admired her handsome husband through tranquil eyelids. Yes, he was a firm husband, but he was a fair husband. And she'd completely lost her heart to him. Mrs. Clara Davies closed her sleepy eyes, happy and well-spanked, knowing it wouldn't be the last time she fell asleep buried against her husband's chest with a very sore bottom.