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ZONDERVAN

Fit to Be Tied

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ONE

BETHLEHEM SPRINGS, IDAHO, APRIL 1916

Cleopatra Arlington studied the horses in the corral. This bunch of mustangs had been captured off the range in the southwest corner of the state. Wild didn't begin to describe the look in their eyes. They were wary, some scared, a few mean, and none of them wanted to be where they were now, walled in by fences.

“But I reckon we'll make saddle horses out of you yet.”

Cleo wasn't known as the best wrangler within two hundred miles for nothing. She'd learned a thing or two about wild horses over the years. For that matter, she knew a thing or two about all kinds of wild things, having a tendency to be a bit wild herself. At least according to how society viewed her.

The sound of an approaching automobile drew her around. Was it—it couldn't be. But it was! Coming up the road was her twin sister, Gwen, and her brother-in-law, Morgan McKinley. The couple must have returned to Bethlehem Springs a day ahead of schedule.

Cleo whipped off her battered Stetson as she strode toward the house, grinning her welcome, arriving at the porch steps about a

minute before the Ford Touring Car rolled to a stop and the engine went silent.

“Well, look at you!” Cleo said when her sister disembarked from the automobile. “Those are big city duds if ever I’ve seen any.”

That was one thing folks could count on. As sure as Cleo Arlington could be found in trousers and boots seven days a week—saving for two or three hours on Sunday mornings—Gwen McKinley would always look like she’d stepped right off the page of some fashion magazine.

In response, Gwen turned full circle, displaying the dark mauve dress and matching hat to their full advantage.

“I take it that means you did lots of shopping while in New York City.” Cleo gave Gwen a warm embrace. “We’ve missed you around here.”

“I’ve missed you too. Oh, Cleo, I wish you’d come with us. We had the best time.”

“I don’t imagine Morgan feels the same, the two of you married only eight months. You didn’t need me tagging along. You already had Mother for half of the trip.”

A rosy hue flooded Gwen’s cheeks as her gaze shifted to Morgan. The love in her eyes both delighted and saddened Cleo. Delighted because she was glad to see her fraternal twin so happy. Saddened because she was beginning to doubt she would ever find the same kind of happiness. Last year she’d fallen hard for a cowboy named Tyler King and had thought he was falling for her, too, but he hadn’t turned out to be the man she’d thought him. Did someone exist who could love Cleo as she was and not want her to become a more conventional female? She hoped so. She surely hoped so.

“Is Griff around?” Morgan asked after giving Cleo a hug.

“Yeah.” She tipped her head toward the house. “Dad’s inside,

going through his ledgers. You know how he likes to have the accounts balanced right down to the last penny.”

Morgan glanced at his wife. “I’ll go in and talk to him while you two catch up.”

Gwen nodded as she hooked arms with Cleo. “Let’s sit on the porch. It’s too beautiful a day to go inside. I’ve missed the mountains so much. Our trip was fun and seeing Grandfather and Grandmother was wonderful, but it’s good to be home at last.”

Once they were seated, Cleo asked, “How was Mother when you left her?”

Her sister gave a slight shrug. “Mother’s always the same.” That was Gwen’s polite way of saying their mother thought of herself first and others second.

Cleo set her hat on her knee and traced the brim with her fingertip. “Mother stayed in Bethlehem Springs so long, I started to believe she might stay here for good. I think Dad was hoping she would too.”

“But if she’d stayed, Cleo—if she’d come to live with him as his wife after so many years apart—would either of them been happy? I don’t think so. Not until she lets God change her heart.”

“I reckon you’re right there.”

Gwen leaned forward on her chair. “But I’m certain she’ll come for another visit before the year is out. By November or December, I imagine.”

“So soon? I can’t think why she would. Look at all the years that went by before she came this time.”

“I’m sure of it.” Gwen smiled and lowered her voice to a whisper. “She’ll want to see her first grandchild.”

Cleo opened her mouth to exclaim, but Gwen silenced her with an index finger to the lips and a shake of her head.

“Not a word, Cleo. I’m not sure yet. I haven’t told Morgan, and I shouldn’t have told you before him.”

“Land o’ Goshen!” Cleo’s voice quivered with excitement. “How am I to keep such a secret, Gwennie? I’ll like to burst wide open with the news.”

“I don’t know how, but please do.”

Cleo glanced toward the door, then back at her sister. “What will you do if you’re pregnant? About your duties as mayor, I mean. Is there going to be another special election?”

“No. I’ll complete my term in office. That will only be for a year after the baby arrives. We shall manage somehow. Then I’ll happily retire from public service. At least for a time.”

“If that don’t beat all.”



Griff finished reading the letter, refolded it, and slipped it into the envelope. Then he looked at his son-in-law and waited for further explanation.

Morgan met his gaze. “The Duke of Dunacombe believes it’s best that Lord Sherwood not work at the spa, that he should be kept away from people of wealth and high society who might try to befriend the son of a duke and possibly encourage his . . . less desirable habits.”

“Which are?”

“Before Lord Sherwood went off to war, he had the reputation of being quite the lady’s man. He showed no inclination to marry or to begin practicing law. From the duke’s earlier correspondence, I believe Lord Sherwood has spent most of his time since leaving the hospital on pursuits such as drinking and gambling.” He cleared his throat. “And involving himself with a woman of ill repute.”

Griff steepled his fingers in front of his chest. "Have you met the young man yourself?"

"Yes."

"And what did you think of him?"

Morgan leaned forward in his chair. "I liked him. A great deal, as a matter of fact. He showed real kindness to my mother and was pleasant and good natured whenever I was with him. I can see why the ladies found him attractive back then. He had a real charm. But I felt sorry for him too. Nothing the fellow did was right as far as the duke was concerned. At least that was my observation."

Griff felt his heart going out to this unknown young man. Injured in the war. Unable to please his father. Using liquor and other disreputable behavior to fill an emptiness inside him. It sounded to him as if Sherwood Statham could use a good dose of hope.

"Griff, I'm hoping you'll let Lord Sherwood live and work on the ranch for the next year."

"Here?" He should have seen that request coming.

Morgan nodded. "I know it's an imposition. I'm not sure how extensive his injuries are, not sure what he'll be able to do. But he'd be isolated on the ranch and away from temptation."

There were plenty of reasons Griff could have used for declining. After all, he'd never met the young man. But that familiar quiet voice in his heart told him he couldn't refuse, that God would have him reach out a hand of friendship to someone in need.

"Yes, Morgan," he said softly. "Lord Sherwood can come to work on the ranch. We'll make a home for him here."



Sherwood stared out the window of the passenger car, watching the countryside roll by. After the first thirty-six hours of train travel,

he'd begun to wonder if there was an end to America. Its vastness was difficult to comprehend until a person had listened to the *clackity-clack* of wheels on rails for hours on end.

Maybe he should go to the dining car. No, he wasn't hungry. Besides, he'd already discovered that American cuisine left a great deal to be desired. He wouldn't mind a drink, but after suffering through his last hangover aboard ship, he'd decided that it was time to scale back on his alcohol consumption. After all, he wanted those reports going to the duke to be good ones.

He sighed as he looked away from the window. Across the aisle and facing him sat a woman who had boarded the train at a stop called Omaha. She looked to be in her early twenties and was pretty in both face and form. But he'd noticed how her eyes skittered away from the scar on his cheek the first time she looked at him, and she'd been careful not to glance his way again.

Hers was a not uncommon reaction; Sherwood had seen more than his fair share of grimaces and wincing since his release from the hospital. But that didn't mean he'd grown used to them. The doctors had told him the scar would eventually look less angry. Time would help it fade, though it would never disappear. There was little else they could do—for the scar or the limp. Perhaps if he hadn't been forced to lie in the trench on the front lines for twelve hours. Perhaps if the stretcher bearers had been able to reach the Regimental Aid Post sooner. Perhaps if the Casualty Clearing Station had sent him back to England without delay. Maybe then . . .

Vain, his father once had called him, and he supposed it was true. He'd been rich, young, handsome, and happy-go-lucky. From the day he attended his first ball, he'd enjoyed the attention of the ladies from sixteen to sixty. As the fourth son of the Duke of Duncombe, he hadn't had to worry about marrying and producing an

heir, the way his oldest brother had. He'd had all the time in the world to enjoy himself before he settled down.

That had been before England declared war on Germany. That had been before he joined the army in early 1915 in a fit of drunken patriotism, certain he and his brothers-in-arms would win the day and be home in England in a fortnight.

But the war hadn't been what he expected, and he and his comrades hadn't beaten the enemy in a matter of weeks. Instead, the war had defeated him. Changed him. Changed the world he knew, once and for all. The conflict had taken the lives of too many of his friends and left him with a bum right leg and a scarred face. And it had helped put him on this train to what had begun to feel like the ends of the earth.



Cleo reached for the empty platter, planning to clear the table as usual, but was stopped by her father.

“Did Gwen tell you why Morgan wanted to talk to me?”

“No. Was it something special?”

He shrugged. “You could call it that. He’s been asked to find a place to stay for the son of a friend from England. Morgan doesn’t think the resort is the right place for him, so he’s asked if we would bring him here for the next year.”

Cleo wasn’t sure what to say at first. She liked kids, but it seemed a lot to ask. A year was a long time. What if the boy didn’t like living on a ranch? “I don’t mean to sound unwelcoming, Dad, but do we need some greenhorn kid underfoot? We’re coming into the busiest time of year.”

“He may be green, Cleo, but he’s no kid.” Her father gave her a half smile. “His name is Sherwood Statham, he’s thirty years old, and he’s the son of a British duke. He was severely wounded in the

war in Europe and is having a difficult time adjusting again to life in England.” Her father cleared his throat. “He’ll be coming to the ranch to work, and I’d like you to supervise him when he gets here, show him the ropes.”

A dude. A dandy. The son of a duke. This was worse than she thought. He’d be so ignorant he couldn’t teach a hen to cluck. And her father wanted her to show him the ropes. What he meant was she was going to have to look after this Statham fellow and make sure he didn’t wind up at the wrong end of a branding iron. Was she being punished for something?

“Cleo, men don’t soon forget what they see and do in war. We need to show this young man some compassion, patience, and understanding. I imagine his heart and mind need healing even more than his body. That’s the way it often is when a soldier returns from war. From what Morgan told me, my guess is that’s true of Mr. Statham too.”

She felt a sting of guilt. Her father was right, of course. She needed to treat Sherwood Statham with Christian kindness.

But that didn’t mean she had to *like* being responsible for him.