



# *Fit To Be Tied*

Book #2, The Sisters of Bethlehem Springs series

## Prologue

*Dunacombe Manor, England  
March 1916*

“Your father is waiting in the library, my lord.”

“Thank you, Chadworth.” Head pounding from the previous night’s enjoyments, Sherwood Reginald Wakeley Statham, the youngest son of the Duke of Dunacombe, shrugged out of his coat and handed it to the butler, followed by his hat and gloves. “Is Mother with him?”

“No, sir. I believe her grace has taken to her bed.”

Sherwood flinched. That didn’t bode well for this meeting. His mother had acted as a buffer between him and his father’s anger since he was a boy. “Is she ill? Maybe I should go up to see her first.”

Chadworth lifted his eyebrows but said nothing. He didn’t have to. Sherwood knew he was expected in the library immediately, not fifteen or thirty minutes from now. The duke hated to be kept waiting, especially by Sherwood, the son who disappointed him at every turn.

“I’ll go straight in.” Might as well receive whatever dressing down his father wanted to mete out. “Very good, my lord.”

Sherwood followed the long hallway to the library, accompanied by the sound of his uneven gait — a sharp click upon the tiled floor followed by a soft slide. He hated it. Hated even more how the walk down this hallway for a meeting with his father never failed to make him feel ten years old again. Not a good feeling for a man of thirty years.

He caught a glimpse of himself as he passed a large, ornate mirror and was immediately sorry. The ragged scar on his face blazed a bright red against his pale skin. Dark circles ringed his eyes, evidence of the many nights he'd gone without sleep, instead drinking and gambling till morning.

When he entered the library, he found the duke standing near the windows that overlooked the extensive gardens of Dunacombe Manor, hands clasped behind his back.

“Good morning, sir,” Sherwood announced himself.

His father turned and gave him a dour look. “So . . . you're here at last.”

“I came as soon as I received your message.”

“Hmm.” The duke walked to a nearby chair and sat, then waited for Sherwood to do the same. “I have come to a decision about this . . . this latest escapade of yours.”

This latest escapade. The duke had obviously learned of his involvement with Lady Langley. The scandalous divorcée, twelve years his senior, had a reputation for enticing wealthy young men. Sherwood had been only too willing to become one of her conquests.

“I am sending you to America, Sherwood.”

“America?”

“I trust you remember Morgan McKinley. He and his mother stayed with us for a number of months about seven years ago. Yes, well . . . I have arranged with Mr. McKinley to find you employment and a place to live.”

So this wasn't a sudden decision that had come about solely because of Lady Langley. This had been in the planning stages long enough for letters to pass back and forth between the duke and Morgan McKinley. Even before he'd made Lady Langley's acquaintance.

“How long am I to stay in America, sir?”

“You will remain there a year. You will put your life in order, my boy. You will work for the money you spend and learn the value of it. I am done covering your gambling debts and paying for the liquor you and your wastrel friends consume. If you refuse to go, I will turn you out. Do you understand me, Sherwood? If you do not abide by my terms, you will no longer be welcome at Dunacombe Manor nor will I make good on your debts. You will not see your mother or me again.”

Sherwood didn't give his father an argument. He hadn't the energy to protest—not with his head pounding as it was now. At least in America he wouldn't have to see more former school chums leave to fight in the war. Nor be required to attend another funeral when they returned in a box. And perhaps, on the other side of the ocean, the nightmares would stop. Maybe he would be able to sleep again without drinking himself into a stupor first.

“When is it I’m to leave, sir?”

The duke’s eyes widened. It was obvious he hadn’t expected Sherwood’s quick acquiescence. But he hid his surprise a moment later with a brusque response. “You will sail from Liverpool on Monday.”

Sherwood stood. “I’ll be ready. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I shall see Mother. I understand she’s unwell.”

“See that you don’t upset her.” And with that, he rose and walked to the window, his back once more turned toward his son.

## Chapter 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.”

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