



LUCETTE  
NEL



*A Match*  
this sweet story...is sure  
to bring readers hours of enjoyment.  
-SARAH MONZON, AUTHOR  
OF FINDERS KEEPERS

*of Sorts*

# A Match of Sorts

Lucette Nel

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### **A Match of Sorts**

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## *Dedication*

For Jesus. Thank You.

For my mom, my first reader. I miss you every day. For my husband, son, sister and niece. I love you guys!



## *What People are Saying*

Lucette Nel has brought her dynamic characters to life in this sweet story that is sure to bring readers hours of enjoyment. Sarah Monzon, author of *Finders Keepers*.







# 1

Cedar Grove, Texas

December, 1875

"She changed her mind." Caleb Brennan dragged his fingers through his hair. His mail-order bride backed out of their agreement. After three months of corresponding with the young widow, she took one look at him and opted to marry a fellow passenger instead. *Three months*. Wasted! Numerous letters exchanged, arrangements made, money spent, and all to end with Mrs. Haddon heading to Austin in the very stagecoach that was meant to bring her to him.

"You can scowl at me all you want. It won't change anything." Trust his twin to state the harsh reality, without a touch of sugar.

"I'm still processing the sting, Luke." Caleb scrubbed his face. His glower might intimidate Abby and Libby, his daughters, but it was useless on his brother.

"You should've told her sooner." Luke collected the stack of wanted posters and thumped them thrice on his scarred desk to straighten the pages.

"I'm hardly a cripple." Caleb rubbed his aching leg. The pain flared in concert with his frustration. He glanced at the far side of the room. Upright rusted bars like an iron fence separated the jail from Luke's tiny office. The snores from the figure on one of the two

bunks continued undisturbed.

Luke yanked a drawer open and shoved the papers in, and then rammed it. "She probably jumped to the wrong conclusion. Since you kept it a secret, she might wonder what other information you withheld from her."

"Do you suggest I mention I'm a cripple in my next advertisement?"

"You're planning to advertise again?" Luke frowned.

"I need a wife. What choice do I have?" And as far as he was concerned, whoever filled the position could have the face and personality of a fencepost, as long as her presence improved his chances of not losing his daughters to his embittered father-in-law.

"Miss Preston seems interested." Luke studied the steam spiraling from the mug of coffee cradled between his hands.

"You're loco. You know I can't marry Miss Preston." The seamstress might be the prettiest woman in town, but she was too young and too idealistic. His second marriage wouldn't be one of love and companionship, and his bride needed to understand and agree with the terms from the start. He'd experienced love once before. Almost from the moment he'd first laid eyes on Margaret, he'd loved her. And she'd returned his affections. Her death near destroyed him. Never again. His next union would be one of respect and remoteness. An alliance on paper suited him.

Luke drummed his fingers on his desk. "How about I ask Ellen to pose as your fiancée?"

"You want to ask your *wife* to pretend to be my fiancée?" Caleb blinked. The warmth in the sheriff's

office receded despite the old woodstove standing only feet away. "I can't wait to hear what she'd think about this idea of yours." He shook his head. He loved Ellen—as a sister—and she was exactly what Luke needed in his life. But she'd drive Caleb crazy with her endless chatter, even if it was only a fleeting charade. Her overly bright personality would exhaust him.

"Don't look at me like that. It'll be a temporary solution. The girls love and know Ellen." Luke shifted on the chair, scrubbing a hand along his jaw. "There will be certain rules, of course. Limitations. No kissing. No touching."

"It was one thing swapping places as boys to play pranks on people. Having your wife pose as my fiancée is a different ball of wax."

"She'd do it if it means you get to keep the girls."

"She's a saint. What did you do to deserve her?"

"Got the Lord Almighty to thank for that." Luke grinned and dipped his head. "I'll speak with her tonight. We don't have much time—"

"Whoa. You expect the entire town to go along with it?" Caleb braced his elbows on the desk.

"We can try."

"Will you throw those who refuse to play along in jail?" A rustle from the bunk drew Caleb's gaze.

The comatose drunk had rolled over, but audible snores still floated from the cell.

"Can you imagine the entire town in my cell? At least old Jeff would have company."

"I'd rather not." Caleb downed the last of his coffee. After putting so much effort into convincing his daughters how nice it would be to have Mrs. Haddon around, he now needed to tell them their plans had changed. He massaged his hip. The wound had healed,

but the constant pain and distinct limp remained despite the doctor's predictions that it would disappear.

"This is just a hiccup. It'll work out." Luke propped his heels on the desk and tilted his chair back, folding his hands behind his head. "Stuff like this works out on its own all the time."

"That's your suggestion? To wait?" Caleb leaned forward and swiped Luke's feet from the edge of the table just as his brother crossed his ankles.

Few things were more amusing than watching a grown man flailing his arms like a baby bird. Luke managed to keep the chair from tilting, regained his balance, and then landed the chair on all fours on the floor with a thud.

Caleb stood, clutched his cane, and moved to the single window. Puddles dotted Church Street. A lone wagon jumbled toward the general store, the rider hunched against the wet weather. Working his jaw, Caleb leaned his shoulder against the frame. Frosty air seeped through the cracks around the window, and he pressed his forehead against the cold pane.

"What now?"

"I don't know." Last thing he wanted was to be forced into a marriage. But when Reverend Conrad's terms for Caleb to find a mother for the girls remained consistent, Caleb turned to the mail-order bride catalogue. His father-in-law might be a minister, but many of his friends held prominent positions: judges, lawyers, and lawmen regularly dined at Reverend Conrad's table, and Reverend Conrad held Caleb accountable for the death of Margaret.

"I don't imagine you'll say that to Reverend Conrad, especially since he's set on taking your girls

home with him?"

Caleb slumped against the wall and folded his arms. There were no answers to be found in the rafters, but he preferred the view to Luke's face.

His father-in-law was bound to arrive in a couple of days. Caleb planned to be married to Mrs. Haddon by the time the man climbed off the stage. Mrs. Haddon had shown a similar interest, which was why she'd agreed to marry him. From their first written correspondence, she'd sounded like the perfect candidate. She was educated and a widow. Exactly what Caleb needed for Abby and Libby. *I need wisdom, Lord. And help.*

"I'll just have to deal with Reverend Conrad when he gets here."



Heat welcomed Grace Blackwell as she stepped into the mercantile and inhaled the variety of fragrances, vinegar, coffee, and kerosene the most prominent. An imposing Christmas tree dominated the far corner. The decked-in-Christmas decorations window released what felt like a swarm of wasps in her chest. The store seemed to stock everything imaginable, from saddles and harnesses to pots and brooms. The very place she'd rather avoid.

The door closed behind her on its own account, and all warmth evaporated. From beneath the protection of her hat's brim, she observed the cluttered room. Ten customers. Three men slouched at the counter, cowhands judging by their attire and posture. They appeared as uninterested in her presence as she was in theirs. None fitted Willie Pratt's image. Where

was the man? Seven women—dressed in impractical ruffles and frill—clustered at the various bolts of material. They watched her the way she suspected they'd eye a drenched rat—or a wet vagabond gripping a Sharps rifle, donned in brown, loose-fitting trousers and a duster. Grace offered a nod as she propped her rifle against her shoulder. As expected, they turned away.

Her collie gave a vigorous shake at her side, splattering a fine spray of rain across the interior. The women recoiled as if they were avoiding shards of glass. Grace rolled her eyes. She loosened her red scarf around her neck and plodded to the far shelf, her mucky boots adding prints to the dozens left by patrons before her. Jewel followed, the dog's nails clicking against the hardwood floor.

At the shelf holding an assortment of men's clothes, underwear, and practical work pants, she bit the fingertip of her glove and pulled it from her hand. A grimace twisted her lips as she touched a tan shirt, its coarseness expected beneath her fingertips. It had been years since she'd dressed in anything other than flannel, cotton, or denim.

"Mighty fine dog you've got there."

Grace dropped her hand from the second shirt and twisted to find that a fourth man had joined the cowboys at the counter. He gripped a hammer and a can of nails. His trimmed beard and shaggy, coffee-colored hair touching the collar of his coat gave him the appearance of a miner. A handsome, rugged miner. But he wasn't of importance to her. Grace grunted at the preacher's collar peeping through his wool scarf. With a curt nod, she turned away.

"You new in town?"

“Passing through.” Out of habit she lowered her voice and adjusted her scarf over her lips and nose. Talkative reverends. She’d experienced their self-righteousness first-hand. Aside from outlaws, she disliked men of the cloth most. Her stomach grumbled, and she blinked her gritty eyes. Today wasn’t a good day. A restless night and the unexpected rain wasn’t helping either. That hammer-wielding Bible thumper would be better off seeking conversation with one of the ladies that visibly brightened at his presence.

The man set the items on the counter and squatted when Jewel trotted over to him. Grace, too stunned at Jewel’s unusual action, stared as the preacher extended a closed hand, letting the dog sniff him. When the collie licked him, he chuckled—a deep and much too attractive sound—and scratched Jewel’s ear. The dog wagged her tail and licked his hand again, drawing another chuckle from him.

“You don’t like this wet weather, do you?” The preacher ruffled Jewel’s fur and in response, Jewel thumped her tail against the floor.

Grace clamped her jaw. How dare the man use that tone of voice on her dog? Jewel was a working dog and Grace’s companion. Not some kind of spoiled pooch. Why couldn’t people leave her alone? It seemed most towns these days were inhabited by nosy and talkative residents. She did her best to avoid unwanted attention. Wore practical breeches, shirts and coats a size or two too big and kept her shoulder length hair tied back with a leather thong. For almost ten years, her guise worked. People used to keep their distance, put off by her bedraggled appearance. But towns were getting crowded. And people bolder. Or dumber.

“Come on, Jewel. We gotta go.”

“You can’t think about traveling in this weather.” The preacher winced when he straightened and adjusted his stance, putting most of his weight on his right leg. “On a day like this, rain can turn into sleet. Ice makes our roads dangerous.”

Grace bit her tongue. She’d bet her Sharps he hadn’t experienced weather half as bad as she’d endured. He sounded too cultured and refined to be from around these parts. A dandy from some city back east, looking for adventure. His type frequented small towns, like Cedar Grove.

“Caleb, stop coddling the kid.”

Grace’s gaze flitted to a man she hadn’t noticed before. His slightly shorter coffee-colored hair had been sleeked back. Same striking blue eyes. Only this one was clean shaven with a star pinned on his coat. Fantastic.

The preacher—Caleb—held up his hands. “Just being a concerned neighbor.”

“Thanks. But I don’t need your concern.” Grace shoved past him and stomped to the door. She’d rather freeze outside while waiting for the skunk Pratt than join in conversation.



## 2

The persistent nudge in his gut compelled Caleb to investigate the lonesome bark of a dog. No animal should be left outside in this weather. He cracked the door open. A freezing wind whipped at his face. Last fall's robbery still too fresh in his memory, he tightened his grip on the Colt. He lifted the lantern and the warm light pooled in front of him, revealing a world blanketed in white and night. Snowflakes swirled in an exuberant dance. Specks landed against his face, and he shivered. He squinted at the dark yard, his body taut, his skin prickling. Forty yards away sat the white-washed rectangular church, the old oak an intimidating black shape in the back. Aside from the wind, the only sound was the faint tink-a-link from Brett's Saloon. Again, the dog whimpered as Caleb started to retreat back to the warmth of his home.

He swung the lantern to his left, and a snow-covered mound shifted. His heart clenched, and he aimed his weapon and braced his feet.

Half of the shape stood and with a shake, the canine was revealed. One with shaggy fur and a distinct black mark splashed across an otherwise white face. The collie from this morning. Jewel.

After one last survey revealed nothing but an empty backyard, Caleb thrust his gun into the waistband of his trousers. His breath stalled as he

approached the dog to investigate the rest of the snow-covered lump on the ground. A familiar scarlet scarf fluttered in the wind.

"Kid?" He nudged the boy's leg with the toe of his boot. Nothing. Not even a sound. Dousing his unease, Caleb hunkered down beside the still form and rolled him onto his back. He slid his fingers along the kid's smooth jaw and stilled when he found a pulse. Good. It was weaker than he preferred, but regular.

Caleb glanced around. The light from the lantern created ghastly shadows, transforming several of the trees into skeletal beings. Whoever dumped the boy was long gone, and their tracks covered with an inch or two of snow by now.

The best place to take the boy was to Doc Mason's house, but he'd ridden out to the nearby ranches this morning. Because of the storm, he hadn't returned.

Caleb sized up the fellow on the ground. Tattered duster and worn breeches. Boots had seen better days. A gun belt looped his narrow waist, but the holster was empty. The pristine Sharps rifle he'd brandished in the store earlier was missing as well. The kid couldn't weigh more than a hundred and ten pounds. And from his lack of facial hair, he couldn't be a day older than sixteen. Decision made, Caleb set the lantern down and hoisted him up over his shoulder and nearly sent the boy flying. The kid was lighter than he'd figured, and his clothes were damp.

The dog whined.

"Come on, Jewel. Let's get you and your master inside." The stab in Caleb's leg intensified as he stood. Gritting his teeth, he lifted the lantern and retreated to the back door of his cabin. With every step, his hip objected with sharp pangs shooting all the way up his

spine. The dog bounded in after him, and Caleb kicked the door shut behind them.

The staircase that ascended one wall mocked him. Darn this leg! Despite the kid's lack in bulk, Caleb would never be able to carry him upstairs. Course determined, he staggered to the sofa where he deposited the unconscious boy on its faded fabric. Margaret—God rest her—wouldn't be pleased, but her sofa was the most accessible.

After a quick assessment, Caleb had to first get the kid out of his cold clothes and then examine the extent of the injuries. Obviously, the bruise on his forehead needed attention.

The mantel clock bonged the hour, and Caleb stifled a yawn. After feeding the fire and putting water on the stove to heat, he labored upstairs to fetch a clean change of clothes. He considered his garments. Though he was of average built and height, the kid downstairs would still drown in his garments. With a grunt, he selected a flannel shirt, practical pants and his warmest pair of woolen socks. On his way down, he stopped at the first door and poked his head inside.

Moonlight streamed in the lone window and slanted across Libby and Abby. It seemed as if they hadn't stirred since they'd fallen asleep. A smile tugged at his lips. Good. It was a sight he never tired of seeing. He closed the door, and the click resonated in the stillness.

With the clothes slung over his shoulder, Caleb struggled down the stairs, using the wall for support. When he and Margaret had first moved here, he'd scaled this staircase with ease and confidence. Now a wagon load of bricks settled in his stomach every time he faced the steps. As he entered the parlor, the collie

lifted its head.

“Don’t worry, girl. Your master will be fine.” He winced. What kind of preacher lied to a dog? With a shake of his head, he stopped at the sofa. First, he pushed the pale hair to the side to inspect the spot where he’d noticed the purplish skin. This kid had been bashed with something solid. Honestly, the bruise had the suspicious shape similar to the stock of a rifle. Probably with the rifle the kid had with him this morning.

Caleb lowered onto one knee and sniffed the air near the boy’s face and found no scent of alcohol. Shoulders relaxing, he tugged off both leather gloves, revealing slender hands with bruised knuckles and palms covered in calluses. At least for all the kid’s physical awkwardness, he was hardworking. A little delicate, but a hard worker. Worn boots were pulled off, and then Caleb peeled away cold woolen socks. *Thank You, Lord.* No sign of frostbite marred the narrow feet. After unbuckling the belt, Caleb let it drop on the floor with a thud. The scarf followed. With haste, he unbuttoned the dark coat, slid it from the slack form, and gritted his teeth at the dark stain on the tan shirt sleeve. The blood was too bright to have been from an old wound, but except for the blood, the garment had no damage. A bleeding wound delivered a myriad of different concerns. Infection being the biggest worry.

Drawing a breath, he unbuttoned the shirt. The sooner he could examine the wound...As the material parted, Caleb’s throat closed. He blinked at the peculiar broad straps of cloth wrapped around the kid’s chest. Subtle but identical mounds caught his eye. He leapt from the sofa as if scalded. Impossible! It couldn’t be.

Heat spread over his scalp and slid down his neck. His gaze flitted back and forth between the dirt stained face and the meticulously disguised mounds, everything falling into place. The delicate smooth jaw, bow-shaped mouth, and narrow nose kept hidden behind the scarf in the store. The blond hair cropped at a haphazard angle.

The kid was a *woman!*

Caleb snatched the quilt off the rocker and tossed it over her. He paced the length of the parlor.

The dog stood and barked at his movements and the ma...woman on the sofa moaned.

"Shh." Caleb waved at the collie, and the animal returned to its spot by the hearth. Two overly curious little girls underfoot weren't needed at the moment. And neither was a woman screaming at the top of her lungs.

Her eyes clenched tight, and then her face contorted in pain. The blow to the head probably gave her quite a headache. She groaned.

He needed Ellen's help. But fetching her now was impossible. He couldn't leave his two daughters in this weather. Alone. With this...with this person. No properly-reared woman dressed as a man or posed as a man. He gripped his hair.

Luke hadn't mentioned anything about a woman outlaw. Since it would be quite an oddity, he would've made an announcement.

Sandpaper scraped Caleb's throat as he moved back to the sofa. Now was not the time to fret about her reasons for her odd guise. She was injured and in need of assistance. And he was the only one able to offer aid. *Lord, please don't let her wake up while I'm examining the wound.*