



NO MATCH FOR LOVE

by Carol Cox

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Chapter 1

Dry Gulch, Texas

Fall 1893

Lucy Benson cleared her throat. “Walter proposed to me this morning.”

Not one of the members of the Dry Gulch Ladies’ Sewing and Prayer Circle gathered in Prudence Whitfield’s parlor missed a stitch.

One corner of Dottie Jackson’s lips quirked up. “Again?”

Lucy jabbed her needle into the dresser scarf she was embroidering. “Again. And to tell you the truth, it scared me a little.”

Emilie’s good-natured laugh echoed throughout the room. “This makes the sixth time Walter has asked for your hand. Or is it the seventh? I’ve lost track by now. It’s about as surprising as the sun coming up every morning. Predictable, but hardly frightening.”

“It wasn’t the proposal that scared me,” Lucy shot back. “It was the fact that I was

tempted to say yes.”

Dottie and Emilie gasped.

Mrs. Whitfield’s finely arched eyebrows soared toward the white hair coiled atop her head.

Hannah Taylor, who had stopped by for a moment just to say hello, plopped into a chair and stared.

Dottie found her voice first. “You can’t be serious! Marry *Walter*? How could you even consider such a thing?”

Lucy pressed her lips together. “It isn’t like I have much choice, Dottie. It was wonderful of your family to take me in and give me a home after Papa died and left me penniless. But your wedding is only a month away. Once you’re married, I can hardly expect your parents to let me continue staying with them.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. You’re my oldest and dearest friend, and Mother and Father love you like a daughter. I know they would be happy to have you stay on. It would keep the house from seeming empty after I’m gone.”

Lucy knew from long experience there was no point crossing Dottie once she’d made up her mind—even when she was wrong. She forced a smile to her lips and tried to lighten the mood. “You’ll be in charge of your own household soon. Maybe you should consider taking me on as your maid once you’re Mrs. Richard Brighton.”

A ripple of laughter ran around the room, and Lucy flinched. She hadn’t intended her remark to be quite so humorous.

Gertie Claasen laid her needlework down and wiped tears of mirth from her eyes. “What an idea! I can just see you trying to iron linens or clean a floor. Face it, Lucy, apart

from embroidery, you're utterly unsuited for doing anything along domestic lines."

Lucy ducked her head and focused on the dresser scarf, hoping her irritation didn't show. Still, she had to admit the truth of Mrs. Claasen's statement. "You're right. I have no domestic skills . . . or any other prospects. Which is why I may have to take Walter up on his offer."

"Oh, my dear." Mrs. Whitfield laid her knitting in her lap and reached over to press her hand on Lucy's arm. "It takes more than money and land to give you happiness and a true home."

"I know And believe me, that isn't my first choice." *Or my second. Or my tenth.* Walter's tightly-controlled approach to life meant everything had to be done the right way—*his* way. If she gave in to his demands and agreed to marry him, her every action would have to fit that narrow mold as well. Just the thought made her feel as though her chest was being squeezed in a vise.

"But I don't have any other place to turn. I simply can't impose on Dottie's family indefinitely. I've prayed about this ever since I learned about the bad investments Papa made, but God hasn't opened up any other doors." Lucy drew a deep breath. "Maybe marrying Walter is His will for me."

Dottie clicked her tongue. "Pastor Eldridge keeps reminding us that God is a loving Father. I can't imagine marrying Walter being His will for anybody."

Hannah leaned forward, concern shimmering in her light blue eyes. "You truly have no other prospects?"

Lucy shook her head. Hearing her predicament put into words made the situation seem even more disheartening. "I'm afraid not."

Mrs. Whitfield drew herself up and folded her hands. “Ladies, we need to take Lucy’s problem to the Lord.”

After a round of heartfelt prayers, Hannah excused herself to go tend to her five little brothers, and the rest resumed their needlework.

While the group chattered about a new shipment of fabric that had just arrived at the general store run by Mrs. Claasen and her husband, Lucy’s attention remained focused on her dilemma. And on trying to choke back the lump in her throat. It wasn’t her fault she’d never learned to be useful about the house. Being raised by a doting father who catered to her every need, she never had to acquire such knowledge. It wasn’t that she *couldn’t* do anything useful. She just didn’t know how. But surely she could learn, if only someone would give her the chance.

Dottie’s wedding was only a few short weeks away. The Jacksons could hardly be expected to extend their hospitality after their only daughter left the nest. Which meant Lucy needed to find another place to stay . . . and soon.

She wrapped the navy embroidery floss around the tip of her needle to form another French knot. Was marriage to Walter the answer God had for her? A vision of her insistent suitor swam into her mind. Walter, with his watery blue eyes and the jutting Adam’s apple that made him look like a tom turkey. Walter, with the controlling nature that made her feel unable to breathe freely in his presence. True, his family had plenty of money. He could offer her a fine home and servants, every comfort her heart desired.

But would that be enough?

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