

**A MATCH
MADE IN TEXAS**

← ————— →
**A NOVELLA
COLLECTION**

A Cowboy Unmatched

* BY KAREN WITEMEYER *

An Unforeseen Match

* BY REGINA JENNINGS *

No Match for Love

* BY CAROL COX *

Meeting Her Match

* BY MARY CONNEALY *



BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

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Published by Bethany House Publishers
11400 Hampshire Avenue South
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A match made in Texas : a novella collection / Karen Witemeyer, Mary
Connealy, Regina Jennings, Carol Cox.

pages cm

ISBN 978-0-7642-1176-8 (pbk.)

1. Love stories, American. 2. Western stories. I. Witemeyer, Karen. Cowboy
unmatched. II. Jennings, Regina (Regina Lea). Unforeseen match. III. Cox,
Carol. No match for love. IV. Connealy, Mary. Meeting her match.

PS648.L6M38 2014

813'.0850806—dc23

2013032379

Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible.

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Karen Witemeyer, Regina Jennings, and Carol Cox represented by Books & Such Literary Agency. Mary Connealy represented by Natasha Kern Literary Agency.

Cover design by Dan Thornberg, Design Source Creative Services

13 14 15 16 17 18 19 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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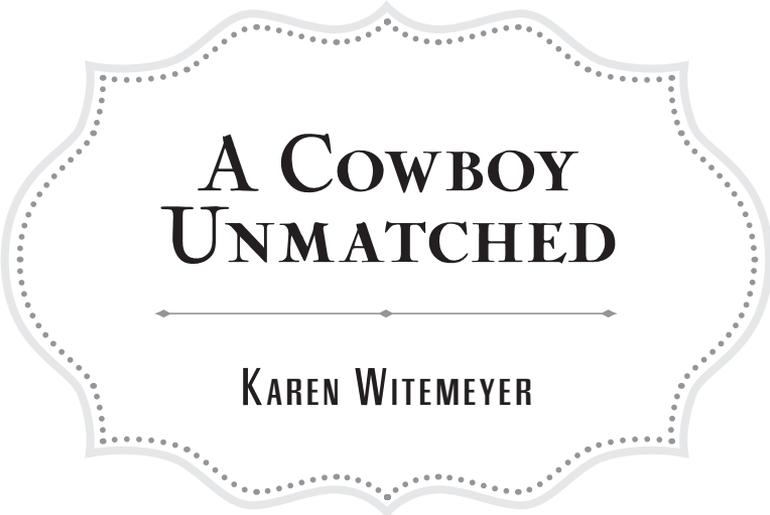
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A COWBOY UNMATCHED

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KAREN WITEMEYER

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★ Chapter 1 ★

TEXAS PANHANDLE
SUMMER 1893

Neill Archer sighed and slouched a bit in the saddle when he caught his first glimpse of Dry Gulch. Another dusty, dirt-colored town in the middle of nowhere. And to think when he first left his family's ranch two years ago, he'd hungered for wide-open spaces. What he wouldn't give to be hemmed in by those big, beautiful Archer pines right about now. But he hadn't earned his right to return to them. Not yet.

Straightening his spine, he clicked his tongue and urged his sturdy roan forward. A new town—no matter how dusty—meant new opportunities and the possibility of work. He'd left home with a goal, and he'd not falter in his pursuit of it—not when he was so close to his target.

The deep *bong* of a church bell reverberated through the crisp morning air, drawing Neill down Dry Gulch's main street. Townsfolk trudged along boardwalks on either side of him, past a general store, a bank, and even a diner. Maybe Dry Gulch had more to offer than he'd first thought.

A wagon, its bed overflowing with a passel of young'uns

spit shined and Sunday ready, rolled ahead of him. The oldest girl smiled shyly up at him as he came alongside. Neill tipped his hat in response, which set the boys to hootin' and hollerin' and the younger girls to gigglin'. The poor gal turned apple red and tried to hide beneath the brim of her bonnet. Yet she managed a bit of well-aimed retribution when the toe of her shoe collided rather squarely with the length of the loudest boy's thigh.

Neill hid his grin and nudged Mo into a trot, taking him past the wagon before the squabble escalated to a level that required parental interference. He and his brothers used to tease and tussle like that, too. Of course, there hadn't been any parents to interfere, so there'd been more than one occasion when a good-natured wrestling match spiraled into a fistfight. But even in those cases, the family bond never wavered. They were brothers—brothers who would stand together no matter what trouble came calling.

He missed that security, the assurance that someone always had his back. But then, that was part of the reason he'd left. He needed to prove to himself, and to his brothers, that he was his own man, able to make his way in the world without them breaking everything in for him first.

Crossing into the churchyard, Neill guided Mo over to where the other horses stood tethered near some cedar shrubs, nibbling at the few tufts of grass that thrust up from the hard-packed earth. He dismounted, pulled his Bible from his saddlebag, and gave Mo a fond pat on the neck before striding toward the church steps.

It was still early, so people were milling around outside, visiting with friends and neighbors while children ran circles around the periphery, releasing their excess energy before

they were confined to a pew. Neill inserted himself among a group of men and quickly made an introduction.

“Neill Archer,” he said, offering each man his hand in turn. “Fine town you got here. Gives a man hope he might find work with so many folks about.”

A portly gentleman in a fine gray suit eyed him speculatively, though not unkindly. “What kind of work you looking for, son?”

Son? Neill bit back his distaste for the term. *Son, kid, boy*—he’d been defined by those terms all his life. He was twenty-eight years old, for crying out loud. Shouldn’t he have outgrown such monikers by now?

But getting riled wouldn’t help him find work, so Neill shrugged off his pique and addressed the man who’d offered the question. “I’ve done a bit of everything, really. Ranch hand, cattle drover . . . I’ve laid track for the railroad, put up windmills, built barns, repaired roofs, dug wells.”

The sound of an indrawn breath behind him drew Neill’s head around. A willowy blond woman jerked her head away the instant his gaze landed on her, but he’d caught a glimpse of interest lurking in her light blue eyes before she’d shuttered them.

He turned back to the men and grinned. “I’m open to any honest labor with a decent wage attached.”

The men returned his grin with genuine warmth and nods of understanding.

“Old man Johnson might need some help around his place,” one of the men suggested. “His gout’s been acting up, and he ain’t been able to finish fencin’ off that back pasture like he wanted.”

Neill’s spirits lifted, only to plummet when a third man

shook his head. “Naw. His boys rode in from Amarillo last week and finished stringing the wire. Good boys, Thomas and Grant. Wish mine helped out half as much around our homestead.”

“They got their own farms to tend, Yancy. You know that. You can’t expect them to work both your spread and their own.”

Apparently Yancy could, and that was all it took to veer the conversation off course. Neill held his tongue while the men debated the level of involvement sons owed their fathers. Maybe he’d have a chance to bring the issue up again later. Besides, the parson had started waving people into the building.

As he passed through the doorway into the sanctuary, he scanned the crowd for the woman he’d seen outside. Perhaps *she* knew of some work in the area. He spotted a woman with pale blond hair and a dress that looked vaguely familiar, though he couldn’t have said for sure that it was the same one he’d seen outside. She was already seated in a pew, so all he could see were her shoulders and the back of her head, but he decided it wouldn’t hurt to look for a place to sit in her vicinity. He spotted a vacant seat in the row in front of her, so he slipped into it and turned to introduce himself—only to find her immersed in a whispered conversation with the child seated next to her. Not wanting to intrude, Neill twisted to face the front and bit back an impatient sigh. He’d just have to wait until worship concluded to speak to her.

Except when worship concluded, she’d disappeared again.

It was probably his fault he’d missed her. Feeling a tug on his heart, he had kept his head bowed for an extra moment or two after the preacher’s *amen* rang through the church.

He'd add a few thoughts of his own to the prayer before rising—requests for patience and greater trust in the Lord's provision. He guessed he shouldn't be surprised then to find himself in particular need of those qualities when his one hope for an employment lead had vanished.

Neill shook his head and smiled at the irony. *Well, Lord, the Good Book says you know what we need before we ask. Guess I just proved that, huh?*

He visited a bit with the people around him, then reached for the Bible he'd left sitting on the pew. Odd. He didn't recall that piece of paper protruding from the pages. He pulled it free and turned it over to find a message written in an elegant hand.

Roofer needed to repair widow's home. Salary to be paid half up front to cover supplies, half when job is completed. Only men of upstanding character need apply.

Interested parties should meet at the schoolhouse at 7:00 p.m. Monday evening for more details.

Neill jerked his head up and scoured the chapel for anyone who might have left the note. Had it been the mysterious vanishing woman? The note's script certainly appeared feminine. And refined. But she was nowhere in sight.

He turned back to the scrap of paper in his hand. It was worded like a newspaper ad. Perhaps whoever had placed the ad in the paper had heard that he was looking for work and stuck the original copy in his Bible to make sure he saw it. Or maybe God's provision moved faster than he'd anticipated.

Neill grinned as he stuffed the note into his coat pocket. He needed to see about a hotel room for the night. He had a job interview tomorrow.



A dim light was flickering inside the schoolhouse when Neill arrived promptly at seven o'clock the following night. At the door, he pulled off his hat and took a minute to smooth his hair before entering. The door swung in easily at his push, the hinges well oiled. But when he crossed the threshold, he frowned.

The place was empty.

Where were the other applicants? Neill's gaze swept over the empty student desks to the front of the room, where a lantern sat on a table, its muted glow casting shadows on the floor and into the corners. Had the man doing the hiring been called away unexpectedly?

Neill took a tentative step down the deserted aisle. Should he wait? See if the man returned? Setting his hat atop one of the student desks, Neill glanced back out the door standing open behind him. He saw no one. He half expected some kid to slam the door shut and lock him in, then run off laughing with a wild tale to tell his friends about the prank he played on the stranger.

But that wouldn't fit with the handwriting on the note. It had been anything but juvenile.

He took out his watch and checked the time: 7:05. Might as well wait. Someone had left that lantern, after all. The student desks were too small for his long, lanky frame, so he strode to the front of the room, thinking to borrow the teacher's chair. That's when he saw the envelope.

It lay on the table, a few inches in front of the lantern. His name, slightly misspelled—people often left off the second *l* in *Neill* when they didn't know him—was scrawled across the front. He picked it up and glanced inside. A twenty-dollar banknote and directions to the home of a widow Danvers.

Who would leave twenty dollars just lying around like this? Anyone could simply take it and leave the widow high and dry. Or wet, he supposed, since the woman needed a new roof.

Neill had never known his mother, but his best friend's mother had filled that role for him later in life, not caring a whit that his skin was white where Myra's was brown. What if *she* were in the widow Danvers's position? Aged and frail, no husband or sons to take care of her? Neill would go to the ends of the earth to see she was provided for. Apparently this Danvers woman had no menfolk around to fill that need.

Well, the envelope was addressed to him, which meant the widow and her leaky roof were his responsibility now. And Archers never shirked their responsibilities. Neill slipped the envelope into a pocket in the lining of his coat and turned down the wick of the lantern until it sputtered and went out.

Whoever had put this little scheme in motion had hand-picked him for the job, and he aimed to see it through.