



The Cowboy's Holiday Blessing (Cooper Creek Book 1)

By Brenda Minton

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Reformed rebel Jackson Cooper thinks he can handle anything—until a sullen teenage girl appears at his ranch, claiming the impossible. Even though he's not Jade's father, he can't turn her away, knowing she's in need. But he's going to need the helping hand of compassionate schoolteacher Madeline Patton. An unlikely duo with their own secret fears, Jackson and Maddie certainly don't expect the Christmas surprise of instant parenthood. Yet as they work toward giving a foster child a home, they might just discover the most wonderful gift of all: family.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Brenda Minton lives in the Ozarks with her husband and three children. Life is chaotic but she enjoys every minute of it with her family and a few too many dogs. When not writing she's drinking coffee, talking to friends, or hanging out at the river with her family and extended family. visit her online at www.brendaminton.net

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The rapid-fire knock on the door shook the glass in the living room window. Jackson Cooper covered his face with the pillow he jerked out from under his head, and then tossed the thing because it smelled like the stinking dog that was now curled at his feet, taking up too much room on the couch.

The person at the front door found the doorbell. The chimes sounded through the house and the dog growled low, resting his head on Jackson's leg. The way his luck went, it was probably one of his siblings coming to check on him. This could go two ways. Either they'd give up, knowing he was alive and ignoring them, or they'd break the door down because they assumed the worst.

He opted for remaining quiet and taking his chances. Moving seemed pretty overrated at the moment. Three nights of sleeping on the couch after a horse decided to throw him into the wall of the arena, and this morning it felt like a truck had run over him.

The way he figured it, after another attempt or two they'd give up. Unless the "they" in question weren't his siblings, but instead someone with literature and an invitation to church. Or it could be that girl he dated last month, the one that wouldn't stop calling. He covered his face with his arm and groaned. The dog at his feet sat up.

The door rattled again and the dog barked. The next time they knocked harder. Jackson shot the dog a look and Bud cowered a little.

"Thanks, you mangy mutt."

He sat up, careful to breathe deep. Bruised kidneys, cracked ribs and a pulled muscle or two. Man, he was getting too old for this. He'd given up bull riding a few years back for the easier task of raising bulls and training horses. Every now and then a horse got the best of him, though.

He got to his feet and headed for the door, moving slowly and taking it easy. He buttoned his shirt as he walked. The dog ran ahead of him and sat down in front of the door.

When he got to the door he looked in the mirror on the wall and brushed his hands through his shaggy hair. He rubbed a palm across whiskers that should have seen a razor days ago.

"I'm coming already." He jerked the door open and the two people on his front porch stared like they'd just seen a man from Mars.

He glanced down. Yeah, his jeans were the same ones he'd worn yesterday and his shirt was pretty threadbare, but he was fully clothed and decent. He ran a hand through his hair again and tried to smooth it

down a little.

"What?" If they were selling cookies or raffle tickets, he wasn't going to be happy. Take that back; he already wasn't happy.

The woman frowned and he remembered her. She'd moved into the old homestead a year or so back. She wore her typical long sweater, longer skirt and her hair in a ponytail. The glasses that framed big, brown eyes were sliding down her nose. He shook his head and focused on the girl next to her. A kid with blond hair and hazel-green eyes. Man, those eyes looked familiar.

"Mr. Cooper, we... I..." The schoolteacher stumbled over her words. He was on painkillers but he remembered her name: Madeline. Yesterday he'd barely remembered his own name, so that was definitely an improvement.

He grinned because the more he smiled, the more flustered she always got. At that moment she was pulling her heavy sweater a little tighter. A week or so back he'd helped her put groceries in her car and she'd nearly tripped trying to stay away from him.

"Ms. Patton."

"Mr. Cooper," she said, pushing her glasses back in place. She was cute, in a schoolmarm kind of way. "Mr. Cooper, this young lady was dropped off at my house."

"And this young lady is my problem why?" He shifted his attention from Madeline Patton to the girl at her side.

The girl glared at him. He guessed her to be about thirteen. But for all he knew she was sixteen. Or ten. Kids grew up too fast these days. And yeah, when had he started sounding like his parents? He'd kind of thought if he didn't get married and have kids it wouldn't happen.

Wrongo.

He leaned against the door frame. The dog had joined him and was sitting close to his legs, tongue lapping up cool air.

"Mr. Cooper, it is your problem..."

"Call me Jackson." He grinned and she turned three shades of red. He could do one shade better than that. "And I'll call you Maddie."

Yep, from rose to pure scarlet cheeks.

"Madeline." Her little chin raised a notch as she reminded him. "Please let me finish."

He nodded and kept his mouth shut. Time to stop teasing the teacher. But for the craziest reason, one he couldn't grab hold of at the moment, he couldn't stop smiling at her. Maybe he'd never noticed before that her smile was sweet and her eyes were soft brown.

Maybe it was the pain meds talking to his addled brain, scrambling his thoughts the way his insides were already scrambled. Something was causing random thoughts to keep running through his mind. Worse, to jump from his mouth.

"Mr. Cooper, this young lady was dropped off at my house by her aunt. She left the girl and drove away." She paused a long moment that felt pretty uncomfortable. He got the distinct impression that she was making a point, and he didn't get it.

"Why is that my problem?"

The girl stepped forward. A kid in a stained denim coat a size too small and tennis shoes that were worn and holey. She brushed back blond hair with bare hands red from the cold. When had it gotten this cold? A week ago it had been in the sixties.

The kid gave him a disgusted look. "What she's trying to tell you is that I'm your daughter."

"Excuse me?" He looked at her and then at the teacher. Madeline Patton shrugged slim shoulders.

"I'm your daughter."

He raised his hand to stop her. "Give me a minute, okay?"

Jackson rubbed his hand through his hair and took a deep breath. Deep as he could. He turned his attention back to the girl with the hazel-green eyes. He noticed then that the blond hair was sun-bleached, sandy brown more than blond.

The kid stared back at him, probably waiting for him to say or do something. Now, what in the world was he supposed to do?

"Aren't you going to say something?" She stepped close, a determined look on her face.

"Can you give me a minute? It isn't like I got a chance to prepare for this. It's early and I wasn't sitting around thinking a kid would show up on my door today, claiming to be mine."

"Mr. Cooper—" Madeline Patton stepped forward, a little cautiously—"I know this is awkward but we should probably be calm."

"Calm?" He laughed at the idea of the word. "I didn't plan on having the postal service deliver a package to my house today. I certainly didn't expect a special delivery that walks, talks and claims to be mine."

It really wasn't possible. But he could keep some random thoughts to himself. He could take a deep breath and deal with this.

"Why do you think I'm your dad?"

The girl gave him another disgusted look and then dug around in the old red backpack she pulled off her shoulder. She shoved past some clothing and a bag of makeup. Finally she pulled out a couple of papers and handed them to him.

"Yeah, so I guess you're the clueless type," she said.

Nice. He took the papers and looked at them. One was a birth certificate from Texas. He scanned the paper and nearly choked when he got to the father part—that would be the line where his name was listed. Her mother's name was listed as Gloria Baker. The date, he counted back, was a little over thirteen years ago. Add nine months to that and he could almost pinpoint where he'd been.

Fourteen years ago he'd been nineteen, a little crazy and riding bulls. At that age he'd been wild enough to do just about anything. Those were his running-from-God years. That's what his grandmother called them. His mom had cried and called him rebellious.

He handed the birth certificate back to the kid. Her name was Jade Baker. He wanted a good deep breath but it hurt like crazy to take one. He looked at the second paper, a letter addressed to him. Sweet sentiment from a mom who said Jade was his and he should take care of her now. The handwriting had the large, swirling scrawl of a teenager who still used hearts to dot the *i*.

The name of her mother brought back a landslide of memories, though. He looked at the kid and remembered back, remembered a face, a laugh, and then losing track of her.

"Where's your aunt?"

"Gone back to California. She said to tell you I'm your problem now."

"And Gloria?" Her mother. He kind of choked on the word, the name. He hadn't really known her. Madeline Patton gave him a teacher look.

"She died. She had cancer."

Now what? The kid stood in front of him, hazel eyes filling up with tears. He should do something, call someone, or take her home. Where was home? Did she have other family? He didn't know anything about Gloria Baker.

He looked at Madeline, hoping she had something to say, even a little advice. The only thing she had for him looked to be a good case of loathing. Nice. He'd add her name to the list. It was a long list.

"I'm sorry." He handed the papers back to Jade. "But kid, I'm pretty sure I'm not your dad."

Madeline Patton had pulled the girl into her soft embrace while giving him a look that clearly told him to do something about this situation. What was he supposed to do? Did she expect him to open his door to a teenage girl, welcome her in, buy her a pony?

He had known Gloria Baker briefly years ago. He'd never laid eyes on Jade. He wasn't anyone's dad. He was about the furthest thing from a dad that anyone could get.

This wasn't what he wanted. The kid standing in front of him probably wasn't too thrilled, either.

"We'll have to do something about this." He ...

Users Review

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