

Praise for Brenda Minton and her novels

“Community, traditions and faith combine to create touching scenes.”

—*RT Book Reviews* on
The Cowboy’s Christmas Courtship

“This heartwarming read shows that God’s plans are always greater than we can envision.”

—*RT Book Reviews* on
The Cowboy’s Holiday Blessing

“Familiar characters and timely issues—addiction and moving beyond past mistakes—combine with touching scenes to make this a very satisfying conclusion to the Cooper Creek series.”

—*RT Book Reviews* on *Single Dad Cowboy*

Praise for Jessica Keller and her novels

“Keller creates a relaxed pace and solid character development, including the secondary characters. The message that we are cherished beyond measure by God is always needed.”

—*RT Book Reviews* on
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“Flawed, relatable characters and tear-jerking scenes remind readers that God’s love is unconditional.”

—*RT Book Reviews* on *Home for Good*

“The characters are strong and compassionate, showing that it is possible to grow despite physical and emotional scars.”

—*RT Book Reviews* on *The Fireman’s Secret*

Brenda Minton lives in the Ozarks with her husband, children, cats, dogs and strays. She is a pastor's wife, Sunday-school teacher, coffee addict and sleep deprived. Not in that order. Her dream to be an author for Harlequin started somewhere in the pages of a romance novel about a young American woman stranded in a Spanish castle. Her dreams came true, and twenty-plus books later, she is an author hoping to inspire young girls to dream.

Avid reader, coffee drinker and chocolate aficionado **Jessica Keller** has degrees in communications and biblical studies and spends too much time on Instagram and Pinterest. Jessica calls the Midwest home. She lives for fall, farmers markets and driving with the windows down. To learn more, visit Jessica at www.jessicakellerbooks.com.

Small-Town Redemption

Brenda Minton

&

Jessica Keller

Previously published as
The Rancher's Texas Match and
The Ranger's Texas Proposal

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**THE RANCHER'S
TEXAS MATCH**

Brenda Minton

Dedicated to the workers who tirelessly serve,
helping children and families in need.

Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father
means caring for orphans and widows in their distress
and refusing to allow the world to corrupt you.

—*James 1:27*



Chapter One



The Silver Star ranch was one of the prettiest, most peaceful places Macy Swanson had ever experienced, from the stately oaks that lined the fenced drive, to the white-sided, two-story home. Behind the home was a red barn. In the background were the three cabins that made up the Lone Star Cowboy League Boys Ranch.

The Silver Star, on first glance, looked as if it might be a family ranch. On second glance, a person noticed the boys. From ages six to seventeen they were the reason the ranch existed in its current state and the reason she had come there. Because one of those boys was hers. Her nephew, Colby.

As she parked under the shade of a twisted old oak tree, she caught the tears before they could fall. She took a deep breath, to let go of the pain, the grief. The guilt. It took more than one breath. It took several. It took a swipe of her finger under her eyes to brush away the evidence. Even now, at the first of October and almost a year since the accident that had taken her brother and sister-in-law, the grief still sneaked up on her.

She missed her brother, Grant. She missed Cynthia,

his wife. They should have been here, raising their son. Instead she was the one trying to fill their shoes after the crash that ended their lives. She was the one trying to put the pieces back together for Colby, only seven and still angry and hurt that his parents weren't coming back.

The guilt sometimes outweighed the grief because she didn't know how to help her nephew. She had always wanted children. Now she doubted she knew how to be a mom. After all, she didn't seem able to fix this one hurting little boy.

Someone tapped on her car window. She jumped a little, moving her hand to the steering wheel and managing to smile up at the man looking in at her.

Tanner Barstow. Wonderful. The rancher and volunteer at the boys ranch stepped back from the door as she pushed it open. He'd posed as Mr. January for the calendar the community put out as a fund-raiser for the ranch. The Cowboys of McLennan County calendar had been a hit, she'd been told. She had a copy hanging in her kitchen. It had been there when she moved in last winter, after the accident.

Her life had become segmented, broken in two distinct halves. Before the accident. After the accident.

Before the accident she'd been engaged to Bill, an attorney in Dallas. She'd been a librarian, managing several libraries in the Dallas metro area.

After the accident... She was still trying to find the person she was after the accident. She now lived in Haven, where she was a librarian at the local library, a substitute teacher at the high school and a volunteer at the Silver Star. Most important, she was the aunt

of Colby, determined to find a way to make that little boy smile.

“Are you okay?” Tanner asked as she stepped out of her car.

He was a full head taller than her five-foot-eight inches. He was rangy, lean and powerful. His jeans rode low on his hips. The button-up shirt tugged at his shoulders. His dark chestnut hair was wavy, and she could tell that when it curled, it bothered him. Maybe because he couldn’t control it. He seemed to be a man who liked control. Dark blue eyes caught her attention. He was giving her a skeptical look, as if he was positive she couldn’t be okay.

And maybe she wasn’t. Maybe she was so far out of her depth here in this small town that she didn’t know if she would sink or swim. Mostly, she felt as if she was sinking.

“I’m good.” She cleared her throat and gave him a smile that wavered; she felt it tremble a little.

“It’s going to get better. Give him time. Give yourself time.” He said it like he meant it. She nodded and closed her eyes, against the brightness of the sun and against the pitying look he was giving her.

“I know,” she finally answered, and she thought it sounded as if she meant it or believed it. She added a hopeful smile for punctuation.

“Come, watch him ride. We’re in the arena today. He’s doing great.”

His hand brushed her back to guide her in that direction. The touch was brief, but the comfort of the gesture couldn’t be denied. She could really use a friend. She could use a hug. She shook off that thought as one that went too far. After all, she’d made friends in

Haven, through work and through the Haven Community Church. She wasn't alone. Not completely.

But the idea of a hug wasn't wholly without merit. What would Tanner Barstow, vice president of the local Lone Star Cowboy League, self-made rancher and horse trainer extraordinaire, do if she asked him for a hug? He'd probably do the man-hug, quick and from the side, and then head for the hills.

Movement in the arena caught her attention. She watched as the boys, all younger, rode around the enclosure. They kept their horses in an easy lope, right hands on the reins, left hands at their sides.

"What are they doing?" she asked as they walked in that direction.

They stopped a few feet from the white, wood fence of the arena. She kept her attention focused on Colby. He was such a tiny little guy, with his mom's dark hair and his dad's green eyes. The ranch hand in the arena called all the boys to the center. A young teen stood next to him. The boys rode their horses and lined up so that boys and animals were facing the ranch hand.

"They're practicing showmanship, for Western pleasure classes at local events. It takes control for the horses, and for the boys."

"This is such a great place. I'm so glad it was here for Colby. I don't know what we would have done."

He nodded, acknowledging the comment. His gaze remained on the boys and the men working with them. "It's the best. It was truly inspired. When Luella Snowden Phillips started this ranch, she probably didn't realize how long-lasting and far-reaching the ministry would be. But it's been here for seven decades. I just wish we had more room and could take more boys."

“They were praying about that at church last Sunday,” she offered. “Someone mentioned that boys had been turned away. And wouldn’t it be an amazing thing if no child was ever turned away from this program?”

“That would be amazing.” He walked away from her, moving a little closer to the fence. “I heard Colby had a hard time last weekend.”

He shifted, settling his gaze on her just momentarily before turning his attention back to the boys in the arena.

Was that an accusation? Or was she just being unduly sensitive? Colby had been allowed a twenty-four-hour pass to go home with her. She’d had to bring him back to the ranch early.

“It’s hard for him to be at home. I keep thinking that it will get easier, that he’ll want to be there.”

“Don’t give up.” He stepped away from her, heading toward the gate. “If you’ll excuse me.”

She nodded as he walked away. From the arena someone shouted. She saw the ranch hand who was working with the boys move quickly. As she watched, the boys dismounted and started tugging their horses away from the center of the arena. Tanner was through the gate, leaving it open in the process.

“Close that,” he called back to her.

She reached the gate and closed it as she went through. The boy at the center of the ruckus was yelling at Jake, the ranch hand who’d been instructing them. The other boys, most of them under ten, were backing away as Tanner hurried to help. It looked like chaos about to be unleashed. The teenager who’d been helping was trying to get control of the nearly half dozen

boys left to fend for themselves as the adults focused on the one youngster who was causing the problems.

The boy at the center of the trouble had hold of his horse and was backing away from the two men. The horse, wild-eyed and jerking to be free, kept moving. The boy held tight to the reins.

Colby hurried toward her, dragging his horse along with him. He had tears in his eyes. His friends didn't look much better.

"Hey, guys. Let's see if we can get these horses in the barn. We'll put them in stalls." She looked to the teen helper for guidance. "You're Ben, right? Do the horses go in stalls?"

He grinned, showing crooked teeth but a charming dimple. His hair was light brown, and his eyes were warm hazel. "Yes, ma'am. I can put the horses in the stalls."

"Why don't we do that?" She looked at the group of boys surrounding her. Big eyes, sweet smiles. She glanced back in time to see that Tanner had hold of the poor horse being dragged about the arena.

"Come on, guys, let's see if we can have fun." She clasped her hands together as she stared at the expectant faces.

Colby didn't look convinced.

"Colby, what story do you like the best?" she asked.

That got his attention. That was their common ground. Stories.

"The one with the dragon slayer," he said as he reached for her hand, his other hand holding the reins of his pony.

"The dragon slayer it is." She only hoped she could remember the story she'd made up on a Saturday night

when neither of them could sleep. She smiled down at her nephew. If she couldn't remember, he would help.

In the background she heard a young voice raised in anger. Or hurt. A calm, reassuring voice spoke; the words were lost, but the tone carried the meaning.

Macy felt that reassurance, even though it wasn't meant for her.

“The dragon slayer knelt in prayer, knowing his kingdom would stand forever and that it was a greater power than his own that kept them safe from the evil...”

Tanner stood just outside the open barn doors, unwilling to go in and interrupt. He'd taken Sam Clark back to the cabin where he lived and to the house parents, Eleanor and Edward Mack, who would make sure he was safe until he could regain control of his behavior.

The eleven-year-old had been at the ranch for six months. He was a good kid who had seen the bad side of life. The result was a lot of anger. Edward and Eleanor could handle it; with degrees in counseling, and their involvement in the local church, they were experts on the kids at the ranch.

Kids wanted people to connect with. Even when they fought the people who cared, they still wanted to be cared about.

Tanner got it. Until the age of ten he'd lived that same life. His parents had been abusive to each other and their children. They'd been drug addicts who couldn't hold down jobs. There hadn't been a safety net until the state sent the three Barstow kids to live with Aunt May in Haven, a community just on the outskirts of Waco. The move had saved his life. His older

brother, Travis, had struggled a bit more and had lived at the boys ranch for a while. Their little sister, Chloe, hadn't been much more than a baby when they were sent to live with their dad's aunt May.

Young voices erupted as the story being told ended. He peeked inside the barn and watched as those five young boys moved closer to Macy Swanson, her nephew included. The little boy had recently turned seven. Colby's hand was on her arm, and he stood close to her side. From thirty feet away Tanner could see her nerves. It was easy to perceive that she was afraid to move, afraid to lose the thin thread of connection between her and her nephew.

But the story she'd been telling had enthralled the kids. They were still asking questions about the dragon and the dragon slayer. She was telling them about faith in a way that a kid could understand.

He didn't know Macy very well, but he had to admire how she could calm a group of rowdy boys with a story. If he was being honest, there were other things to admire, things a man couldn't help but notice. He sure didn't mind admiring or noticing. Sunlight danced through the center aisle of the barn, the beams of light catching in the blond hair that hung loose to the middle of her back. She was tall and classy. Beautiful, really.

And all city.

Things transplanted typically did better when transplanted into a similar environment. That was what he knew from living in the country. A water oak didn't tend to do well in hot, sandy soil. Cacti thrived in the desert. That was just the way it was. City folks thrived in the city, and country people tended to stay in the country.

Macy looked up as he approached, her smile touching her green eyes with a warmth that took him by surprise. The boys remained circled around her. They had avoided the worst of Sam's outburst and had been entertained with a story; they were on top of the world. Even Ben had lurked at the edge, listening to the story.

Ben, fourteen, tall and lanky with a shock of light brown hair, had been at the ranch for two years. He was a good kid. He'd had one failed attempt at going home. He'd been adopted as a preschooler, and the experts said he had trouble bonding because of his early childhood. That made sense to Tanner. The boy was sometimes angry and tended to push away when he started warming up to people.

But he was doing better. They could all see that.

Time. For so many of these kids it took a lot of time to heal. With that thought, his gaze fell on Colby Swanson. The boy's parents had died in a car accident, and his grief had turned to anger that made him act out at school and be difficult to handle at home.

When a spot had opened, Macy placed him at the ranch.

"You boys get all of your stuff gathered up." Tanner let his gaze fall on Colby. The little boy was holding tight to his aunt Macy. "And maybe we can get Miss Swanson to finish her story, or read to you all when you have library time."

His phone rang. Rotten timing. He would have ignored it, but the caller ID flashed the name of the president of the local chapter of the Lone Star Cowboy League, an organization started over a hundred years earlier to help ranching communities. Since Gabriel

Everett didn't call just to shoot the breeze, it had to be important.

Jake, about the best hand around, had entered the barn from a side door. The big bonus was that not only could he break a horse to saddle, he also had a knack with the kids on the ranch.

"Jake, can you and Ben go ahead and take these guys on down to Bea?" He didn't have to spell it out. Beatrice Brewster, the no-nonsense director of the LSCL Boys Ranch, ran the show. She'd watch the kids until she got the all clear from house parents Edward and Eleanor, who had their hands full with Sam.

Jake gave him a thumbs-up and started organizing the boys for the march to the main ranch house. Without asking, Macy fell in with Jake and the boys. She volunteered in the ranch office, helping with accounting. She'd also become pretty adept at finding donations and writing up grants. She didn't usually help with the kids. But at times like this, everyone pitched in and helped out.

"Gabriel, what can I do for you?" Tanner watched as the small troupe marched toward the big ranch house, and then he headed for his truck.

"Tanner, we need to have an emergency meeting of the League. Can you be here in about fifteen minutes? Bring Bea with you. And Katie will probably need to attend so she can take notes for the ranch."

"I'll be there." He glanced at his watch. "What's going on?"

"I'd rather make the announcement when you get here. Let's just say that some prayers are answered a little quicker than others."

Interesting. "I'll be there in ten minutes."

When he pulled up to the ranch, Bea was already on her way down the stairs. Tall and in her fifties, the former social worker for the state was all heart. She adjusted her glasses and smoothed her hair, turning to give a “hurry up” look to the person following her out the door.

Macy Swanson?

The two climbed in his truck, Macy opening the back door and getting in the backseat. Beatrice clicked her seat belt and settled her purse on her lap.

“Katie is staying to help Jake with the kids. I asked Macy to come with us to take notes. I’m going to want my own person there so that we have a record of our own.” Beatrice shot him a questioning look. “Do you know what is going on, Tanner Barstow?”

Like he was one of her kids and someone had TP’d the house.

“No, Bea, I don’t. I got the call the same as you.”

“Gabriel said it’s a good thing. But, Tanner, I’ll have you know, I’m not a fan of surprises. Even of the good variety.”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine.” He glanced in the rearview mirror and caught a glimpse of Macy looking out the window, bottom lip caught between her teeth. He cleared his throat, and she shot him a look. “I’m sorry I put you on the spot back there. So, do you think you’d be interested in spending time reading to the kids? They enjoyed the story you told them.”

“I’m not sure,” she finally answered. “I mean, it would be good, wouldn’t it? The boys enjoyed it. Colby enjoyed it.”

He slowed to make his turn. “Think about it.”

The Everett Ranch, owned by Gabriel Everett, was a

big spread located between the Silver Star and Haven. Tanner parked next to a half dozen assorted trucks and SUVs. He got out quickly so he could hurry to the other side and open the door for the ladies. His dad hadn't taught him to be a gentleman, but Aunt May had. She'd told him someday he'd appreciate the manners she instilled in him. He'd be thankful.

He was, and he wished she was alive so he could tell her how much she'd meant to him and his siblings. But she'd passed about eight years ago, getting them mostly raised, all but Chloe, who had been not quite fifteen. May had at least seen Tanner's business get off the ground. She'd known they would be okay without her.

Eight years later Haven Tractor and Supply was well-established, and Aunt May's small ranch had quadrupled in size. He didn't mind feeling proud of that accomplishment. May had sold off land to get him through college. He'd put the family spread, the Rocking B, all back together for her. It had taken him a few years, buying back the land as it came up for sale or as he convinced neighbors to sell it back to him.

He opened the door for Bea. She stepped out, not needing the hand he held out for her. He reached to open the door for Macy, as well.

"Thank you, Tanner." Beatrice patted his arm, as if he wasn't thirty-two and just twenty years her junior. With Bea they were all kids.

The ladies preceded him to the house. He didn't mind. A few more minutes meant a little more time to think; maybe he might come up with some reason they were all being called to the Everett place for a meeting. But by the time they were shown to the library, where the meetings were held, he still didn't have a clue.

A gavel pounded on the table. Tanner sat back and gave Gabriel his full attention, but then his gaze shifted to the right of the league president. The man sitting in the seat of honor was Harold Haverman, attorney and member of the Lone Star Cowboy League, of which Tanner was vice president. It seemed to him that if there was something going on, Tanner should have been told ahead of time.

Tall, with a black Stetson covering his gray hair and metal-framed glasses on the end of his nose, Harold had presence. And he had a document in his hands that looked far too official.

“Meeting to order.” Gabriel glanced around the group. He cited the date, the time, the emergency status of a meeting of the Waco district Lone Star Cowboy League chapter.

The formalities were taken care of with some seconds, a vote, and then on to new business.

“I would like to recognize our guest, Harold Haverman.”

Harold stood, pushed the silver-framed glasses back in place and shifted the papers he still held. He gave them all a look, serious as could be, no hints as to what this was all about.

“I’d like to thank you all for coming today. I know this is unexpected.” He peered at them over the top of those glasses. “As you all know, we lost a respected member of our community. Cyrus Culpepper passed last week. I know several of you attended his funeral. Today I have the honor of sharing with you his last will and testament.”

“What does this have to do with me?” Bea started

to stand, but Gabriel shook his head. "I have children at home."

"Bea, this won't take a minute." Harold cleared his throat and shook out the papers. "If you'll just give me five minutes to read this. And then we can take care of the details."

He started to read. Silence held as the members looked from one to the other, clearly astonished. Tanner glanced across the table and made quick eye contact with Macy Swanson and got caught in those green eyes of hers. She looked wary and like she was pretty sure she shouldn't be involved. She also looked like someone still hurting. The grief for her brother had turned to pain for a little boy still missing his parents.

Listening as Haverman read the final will of one Cyrus Culpepper, curmudgeon and stirrer of the pot, Tanner thought that maybe they'd all just been tossed in the middle of a big old mess.

I, Cyrus B. Culpepper, am writing this on my deathbed with, per my doc of over forty years, only days or weeks to go. I may be about to meet my maker, but I am of sound mind and hereby bequeath the bulk of my estate to the Boys Ranch, as I was once a resident myself back when the ranch first started in 1947. Yes, that's right. I might be an old curmudgeon who can't tolerate a thing, but since I was once a troubled kid who was turned around by the Boys Ranch, I want to do something for the place. However, I have conditions. When I lived at the Boys Ranch, there were four other original residents who I lost touch with. I would like you to bring them together for

a reunion at the ranch on March 20th, a party on my birthday for the 70th anniversary celebration of the Boys Ranch. That gives you six months. Now, now, quit your bellyaching—given all the newfangled technology, search engines and social media nonsense, you’ll probably find them lickety-split. Though I never tried, so who knows? I suppose I’ve gotten a bit nostalgic in my old age and leave it up to you whippersnappers to do my bidding.

Oh—and one more thing. I had a son, John Culpepper, who I didn’t get on with too well after his mother passed. We were estranged, but I know he had a child, a girl—Avery—who lost her mother. I heard, well after the fact, that my son died when the child was young. I have no idea what happened to her, and I’d like to invite her to the ranch to receive an inheritance.

If the terms of my will are not met, I’ve instructed my attorney, Harold Haverman, to bequeath the estate, minus a small endowment to the Boys Ranch, to Lance Thurston, a real estate developer, to build a strip mall bearing my name. Sometimes you have to provide the right incentive.

Now for the boring part. The “bulk of my estate” is to include my ranch house and all the outbuildings, livestock and land except for the cabin in which I grew up and the five acres of land it sits on. That cabin, five miles from the ranch on the outskirts of town, and land is bequeathed to Miss Avery Culpepper, to be given to her in March. I was a self-starter and believe everyone

should be, but I also believe I did wrong by Avery and want her to have what she likely would have garnered over the years as my granddaughter. The rest of my bank accounts and investments are bequeathed to the LSCL Boys Ranch.
Yours, Cyrus B. Culpepper

Everyone was talking at once. Outrage. Shock. The library fairly rattled with raised voices. Fletcher Snowden Phillips, last remaining kin of the founders of the boys ranch, was the loudest. He was crowing that the ranch was meant to be at Silver Star and nowhere else. For a man constantly trying to litigate against the ranch, that rang false.

Gabriel Everett pounded the gavel on the table, and a hush fell with just a few last-ditch remarks from those wanting to voice concern.

“It looks as if we’ll need volunteers.” Gabriel looked over the group that had gone suspiciously quiet. No surprise. Everyone had something to say until they were asked to contribute more than words.

Macy Swanson raised a tentative hand, and Gabriel gave her the floor. Tanner leaned back in his chair, wondering what she planned on saying...and why he was so interested to hear it.