

HEARTS HAVEN

A COWBOY CHRISTMAS

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Excerpt for A Cowboy Christmas

by Tanya Stowe

Layne reached down to reassure her and stiffened. With Chloe's face no longer hidden, the man would get a good look at her little girl. She braced herself for the reaction that always came when people saw her daughter's round face and slightly upturned eyes. Usually they became speechless because they didn't know how to treat a child with Down Syndrome, or they forgot their manners and stared. Layne's instincts switched into full mama-lion mode, prepared for either response from the long-legged stranger.

Instead, he dropped to a crouch and tipped his large cowboy hat back, giving Chloe a clear view of his face. He waited silently until she peeked at him again. Then he turned one boot to the side so she could see the spur.

“Look here, little one.” His voice had a pleasant timbre, deep and smooth. “It’s not my shoes makin’ that jingle bell sound. It’s this silver thing.” He smiled, and Layne caught her breath at its sweetness. “See? It’s called a spur. You wear ‘em when you ride horses. But I never let mine hurt the animals.” He tilted his head and drew his brows together. “Do you like horses?”

Chloe’s beautiful, blonde, corkscrew ponytail swung rapidly back and forth as she shook her head.

“No?” The man kept his voice low and comforting. “That’s too bad. ‘Cause I happen to know horses love little girls like you.”

Layne’s hackles rose, and she started to ask exactly what he meant by ‘little girls like her,’ but Chloe spoke first, with her slight lisp. “How do you know they like little girls?”

Once again, Layne was shocked into silence. Her daughter never talked to strangers, especially men.

The cowboy's brilliant white smile stood out on his tanned face. "Why, 'cause they told me so."

Chloe's mouth opened and she shook her head. "Horses don't talk." She raised her head to look at Layne. "Do they, Mommy?"

Layne would have had to be deaf not to hear the almost wishful tone in Chloe's voice. How was she going to explain this one?

But the cowboy saved the day. "'Course they don't talk," he said in the same mellow tone. "They show us what they're thinkin', though. When they're scared, they roll their eyes up so you can see the whites, and sometimes their sides shiver. When they're happy, they nicker and push

you with their noses, kinda like a kiss. And when a little girl gets on a horse's back, that horse will trot real soft and easy so she won't be scared." He grinned and winked at Chloe. "Every time."