



A Cowboy Christmas

Delia Latham and
Tanya Stowe

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

A Cowboy Christmas

COPYRIGHT 2013 by Delia Latham and Tanya Stowe

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission of the author or Pelican Ventures, LLC except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

eBook editions are licensed for your personal enjoyment only. eBooks may not be re-sold, copied or given to other people. If you would like to share an eBook edition, please purchase an additional copy for each person you share it with.

Contact Information: titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com

All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version^(R), NIV^(R). Copyright 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica, Inc.TM Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com

Cover Art by Nicola Martinez

White Rose Publishing, a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC
www.pelicanbookgroup.com PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410

White Rose Publishing Circle and Rosebud logo is a trademark of Pelican Ventures, LLC

Publishing History

First White Rose Edition, 2013

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-61116-305-6

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

For Cheyanne, and for Riley...our own little rays of
sunshine.

Prologue

Tucked away inside Layne Mabrey's purse, the last of her money waited to ensure a roof over her and her daughter's heads. She drove through the double gates, beneath a carved wood sign that read "Heart's Haven," heart pounding with terror at this major step towards a new life.

But she'd do whatever it took to keep six-year-old Chloe safe and happy.

With Chloe clinging to her legs, she made her way up the graveled path leading to the big manor house. A host of blooms lined both sides of the walkway, sweetening the air with their fragrance. They climbed the three steps to the door, and Layne drew a deep breath before tapping on the dark wood.

Then they waited, their breath forming little cloudy bursts in the chilly air.

From inside, the unmistakable sounds of celebration gave her pause, and Layne gasped, horrified, when she remembered the date. February fourteenth. Why hadn't she stopped to consider that Andrew Hart might be entertaining on Valentine's Day? It was, after all, a special, much-anticipated holiday for most people. Not for her though, and she hadn't given the possibility a single thought.

She grabbed Chloe's hand. With any luck, her half-timid knock hadn't been heard in the midst of all the frivolity, and she could sneak away with no one the

wiser. But, as usual, her luck wasn't that good. The door opened to reveal an older man with deep grooves around his mouth and crow's feet crinkling his eyes. Andrew Hart, of course. The man who owned the complex of rental cottages, one of which Layne hoped would soon be home to her and her little girl.

The somber fellow looked a little stiff and uncomfortable in impeccable dress-up clothing. In a moment of crystal clarity, Layne knew he donned this type of attire only on rare occasions, and with great reluctance. Every white hair lay slicked into place, but a slight groove in the severely tamed strands told its own tale. Layne bit her lip, amused to find herself seeing the man in a battered old fishing hat, or possibly a baseball cap, and maybe worn overalls. Somehow she thought he'd be right at home in that kind of casual get-up.

"Yes?" The gravelly voice drew her up short, and she realized she'd been staring. Even Chloe, her little brow furrowed, gazed up into Layne's face, clearly confused by her failure to extend a quick greeting.

"I'm so sorry to intrude...I can see you're entertaining."

"That's not a problem." His vivid blue gaze dropped to Chloe, and he winked. "Well, hello there! Why don't you two ladies come on inside where it's warm?"

"Oh, no, we can't." Layne shook her head. "In fact, please go back to your guests. We'll come again tomorrow. I only wanted to inquire about your cottages, and it can wait until then."

Even as she spoke, a man stepped from behind her and onto the porch. He was tall—so tall that he seemed to loom over them. Chloe stepped close and hid her

face in her mother's coat as she always did when she was frightened. The stranger wore a plaid shirt, cowboy boots and hat, jeans, and chaps complete with fringe dangling on the sides.

Taken aback by his cowboy garb, it took Layne a moment to realize he, too, had asked about one of the available units. Mr. Hart handed them both applications and made appointments for the next day, then bid all three visitors a polite good night. The tall stranger gave Layne a shy smile then walked away, his spurs jangling.

Chloe peeked out from behind her. "I want jingle shoes, Mommy."

The cowboy paused then turned around and headed back with a stride that could only be called intimidating. Chloe wrapped her arms around Layne's leg in a grip that would have choked her if it'd been around her throat.

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."

Chloe gave him a little half-smile with her lips sealed tight. She'd just lost her first tooth and didn't like people to see the empty space, so she kept her mouth closed—just one of many little habits.

"When we know each other better, you and your mom can come see my horses, and I'll show you what I mean. OK?"

Chloe nodded, surprising Layne again. Then the stranger rose to his full height. Layne looked up and into the most beautiful, caramel-colored eyes she'd ever seen, with lashes so long and dark they were almost sinful.

Now who was speechless? She struggled to find the right words.

The cowboy seemed to have the same problem. Layne thought he'd invite her to see the horses or at least tell her his name. But the silence stretched on until it was almost awkward. Then the man grabbed his hat and pulled it down over those gorgeous eyes. He nodded once, said, "Ma'am." Then he just walked away.

Layne stared after him, still wondering what happened to her voice.

1

Mug of hot coffee in hand, Layne Mabrey stepped outside and dropped onto the swinging bench that claimed a large portion of her miniscule front yard. While Chloe ate her oatmeal inside, Layne had a few moments to enjoy the solitude of the morning.

From this location bordering the Angelina National Forest, a breathtaking vista spread out before her. When she'd moved into the Heart's Haven complex eight months ago, Layne had vowed never to waste this view—hence the too-large porch swing. She hadn't regretted the purchase for an instant, despite the hole it had eaten in a budget every bit as small as her postage stamp lawn.

This time of morning, with dew sparkling like diamond dust on every blade of grass and fluttering leaf, she could almost believe the world was brand new. Bright, clean, and wonderfully pine-scented, its beauty eased the tension in her soul.

She had twenty minutes to enjoy before heading off to her receptionist job at Hilliard & Beckett Law Firm. Once there, she rarely found an opportunity to go outside and enjoy the fresh air. Thank God her desk sat next to a huge, third-floor window, which overlooked the quaint little town.

Never having been one to spend much time indoors, working behind a desk hadn't been Layne's first choice of occupation. But then, she hadn't been in

a position to be picky when she arrived in Angel Falls, Texas back in February. Her lips curved upward as she recalled that first visit to Heart's Haven.

As it turned out, the spur-jangling cowboy's name was Dex Beckett, and the two of them moved in to adjacent cottages. Almost every day since, Dex had shown up in Layne's front yard and chatted with Chloe about horses. Layne had never met anyone who knew more about or loved the animals as much as Dex.

"He's a horse whisperer," Pia Peretti-Myers had told her. Pia's husband David—old Hart's nephew—pastored The Falls Tabernacle. The couple lived in one of the new, larger units in the complex and helped take care of Heart's Haven and its tenants. "But don't let Dex hear you call him that." Pia's hazel eyes twinkled. "He prefers the term 'natural horsemanship.' He shows people how to understand their horses—travels all over the country teaching groups how to train the animals not to be spooked over gunfire or cannon shot."

Layne couldn't imagine shy, quiet Dex travelling extensively or taking charge in a group of people—at least, not grown-up people. Apparently he did though, even in Hollywood, where he trained movie horses. From what she'd seen of him, Dex was mostly quiet around adults, but with Chloe he talked up a storm.

The therapeutic riding classes where he taught people with special needs how to ride were the handsome cowboy's passion. Layne had been fascinated to learn that he'd once coached an Iraq war veteran who'd lost both legs. Once they got to know each other better, Dex told her that seeing the man's face as he'd galloped across the field would forever be one of the highlights of his life.

A twig snapped nearby. Layne jumped and raised her gaze to find the horse whisperer watching her from the other side of her gate as if conjured right out of her thoughts.

"Layne." He nodded, and his gaze met hers, slid away, then returned to her face. The same shy smile she remembered from their first encounter brightened his expression and turned his eyes to liquid amber. "Pretty mornin'."

She stood and dumped the dregs of her coffee into the flower bed. "It's absolutely gorgeous out here. If I didn't have to go to work, I'd be walking the Angelina Trail."

"I know what you mean." He cocked his head to one side in a gesture that was becoming quite familiar. "How's the job goin'? Ol' Tim treatin' you all right?"

She smiled. Dex's cousin Tim was the Beckett of Hilliard and Beckett, and it was thanks to her Heart's Haven neighbor that she'd obtained the position.

A few days after their first meeting, when they'd both been moving into their cottages, Layne had told Dex that she needed to find a job right away. He'd narrowed those amazing eyes and studied her face long enough to make her squirm, then slowly withdrew a business card from his wallet. His delicious Texas drawl made her smile, despite a desperate need to keep her distance.

"My cousin Tim's one of the partners at this law firm," he said. "He's lookin' for a receptionist. The last girl quit yesterday mornin' and headed off to California, sure and certain she'll be the next big movie star."

Layne reached for the card, but Dex kept a firm hold on it. "You're gonna stick around, aren't you? I'd

hate to send ol' Tim another fly-by-night." A playful grin took any possible sting from his words.

She tugged the card from his fingers. "I promise not to fly away any time soon."

Dex had turned away and heaved a huge box off the back of his pick-up. "Then I guess I'll be seein' you around, Layne Mabrey."

Up in Maine, where she'd lived before, nobody ever got hired on the spot, but things proved different here in Smalltown, USA. She'd walked into Tim Beckett's office armed with Dex's name and walked out with a job.

Now, outside the apartment she and Chloe had occupied since February, she gave her neighbor a smile. "Tim couldn't treat anyone badly, you know that."

"Yeah, I reckon I do." Dex took a step backward. "Well, I guess I ought'a get to work and let you do the same."

"Probably a good idea." Layne chuckled. "We don't want to try your cousin's patience. I'd be terribly disappointed to find that he's capable of meanness, after all."

Dex's crooked grin made Layne's tummy turn an unexpected somersault. She watched him move toward his own gate, wondering where that little belly flip had come from and exactly how she was going to put a stop to it.

2

Dex ducked into his own cottage, closed the door, then rubbed both damp palms down the legs of his jeans. Why did he behave like a nerdy teen every time he came within a hundred yards of Layne Mabrey?

He flipped off a couple of lights, checked his pocket to make sure his keys were there, pulled in a deep breath, and opened his door. Hopefully his beautiful neighbor would be inside, and he wouldn't drive his truck right into that oversized swing she'd planted in her yard.

He managed to drive from the complex with no further embarrassment. But he couldn't help a quick glance in the rearview mirror as he swung onto the road. Despite his hurry to get away, he hoped for one last glimpse of Layne to take him through the day. But she was nowhere in sight, and he sighed as he settled in for the ride to his parents' ranch on the opposite end of Angel Falls.

When the lease on his previous apartment had expired, Dex had considered moving back to the ranch but decided against it. While he built his business, it was more convenient to have a place in town. But now, with the business more established, he spent less time on the road and more at the ranch. If he had his way, he'd soon be spending all of his time there. Not quite ready to make that change, he'd taken one of Hart's cottages...and now he had another reason to stay where

he was. Two pretty little blondes next door.

What in the world was he going to do about Layne?

He'd been a goner from the moment he first saw her on Valentine's Day in front of old Hart's house. The porch light had formed a shimmering aura around her, standing there dressed all in white, and he'd caught his breath as he brought his truck to a halt outside the gate. For one unforgettable instant, he'd been certain he saw a pair of wings fluttering behind her.

He still wasn't sure he'd been so far off.

Over the past several months, they'd spoken a number of times. Layne knocked on his door a few days after he moved in. He'd opened it to find her holding Chloe's hand on one side and a plate of blueberry muffins on the other...and wearing a smile that nearly knocked him to his knees. She'd come to tell him she was now an employee of Hilliard & Beckett and to thank him for the recommendation. Dex hadn't even been able to offer a simple congratulations without tripping over his own tongue, and nothing had changed since then.

Every time he saw her, she looked more beautiful. Silky hair the color of honey drenched in sunshine hung in a straight, smooth fall all the way to her waist. Framed by thick, dark lashes, Layne's eyes reflected the smoky green of the various pines in the Angelina. When she smiled, they brightened to a near-emerald shade and sent little jolts of electricity all the way down Dex's lengthy spine. Perfect ivory skin made him long to touch it...to see if it could possibly be as smooth and soft as it looked.

He slammed his foot on the brake as he

approached a stop sign way too fast and managed to screech to a halt on the safe side of the crosswalk. He sat up straighter and huffed out a breath. Enough. His fascination with the angel next door would get him killed if he wasn't careful.

It was high time he did something about the situation—like untangle his tongue, keep his feet, and get a handle on the blasted shyness that had tortured him all his life.

If you can tame the wildest horse and make a friend of the most frightened child you've ever seen, Dex Beckett, you can do this.

Hauling in a deep, steadying breath, he looked both ways before crossing the empty intersection. He *would* do this, and he'd start tonight by going to her place. Surely, he could think of a reason between now and then.

Darkness had already fallen outside the cottage's front window when someone tapped on the door and Chloe ran to answer it.

"Wait, Chloe!" Layne's voice was sharper than she meant it to be. "I'll get it. You know the rules."

"But Faith says it's Mr. Jingles."

After their first encounter, Chloe had refused to call Dex by any other name than Jingles. Layne tried to convince her that wasn't his name, but the child insisted. Layne had been successful only in getting her stubborn little girl to add the "mister" in respect for an adult. But that wasn't what bothered her right now. Stooping, she took hold of her daughter's shoulders.

"Chloe, we talked about this. Faith isn't real. She

didn't tell you Mr. Jing—Mr. Beckett is at the door because she doesn't exist."

Chloe set her jaw in determination, and Layne pulled in a sustaining breath. She knew that look...it meant a battle and many times, Layne lost those clashes of will.

"But Mommy—"

"No buts." She pointed towards the kitchen. "Go finish your milk and cookies then into the bath."

The cookies did the trick this time, distracting Chloe enough to avert a tug-of-war. Layne sighed in relief then went to the front door to tackle her next battle.

After her surprising reaction to Dex this morning, she'd decided avoidance was the best solution. One didn't have emotional reactions to someone they never saw. She'd even prolonged her errand running after she picked up Chloe from Miss Sophie's school so she wouldn't arrive home at her usual time...the same time Dex always seemed to pull into the driveway next to hers.

And now here he stood on her doorstep.

"Dex. Hello." Her lips trembled around the smile she attempted.

"Hi, Layne!" Dex's open smile faded as Layne couldn't quite meet his gaze. "I guess I should'a called first. You're probably busy gettin' Chloe ready for bed...but this'll only take a minute. May I come in?"

Layne swung the door wider, and he stepped into the living room. Tonight he wore a long-sleeved T-shirt, jeans, and running shoes instead of his habitual cowboy attire. It didn't take away from the man's appeal. In fact, he looked so *right*, standing there shining that little-boy smile on her. He did seem

uncomfortable, though, and a little lost without that big Stetson to hide behind. He tucked his fingertips into his pockets then pulled them out, and his gaze traveled around the room...until it landed on Chloe.

"Hey, Miss Chloe!"

To Layne's surprise, the child slid off her stool and ran to wrap her arms around Dex's legs. "You came to see me, din'tcha Mr. Jingles?"

"I'm always happy to see you, sweetheart." Dex tousled Chloe's tangled mass of blonde curls then swung her up into his arms. "But I came to see you *and* your mommy."

"But you comed!" Chloe's delighted smile forced a chuckle from Layne, who was trying not to melt at the sight of her daughter in Dex's arms, her chubby little hand pressed to his cheek.

"Did you want something, Dex?" Layne's voice came across shorter than she intended.

Dex frowned, obviously put off by her tone. "Umm, yeah, I...uhh...you were late getting home tonight."

"I had some errands to run." She hoped to sound dismissive but wasn't prepared for the hurt in his eyes. Steeling herself, she turned away.

He cleared his throat. "I wanted to ask if...uhm...if you and Chloe are helping with the Heart's Haven Christmas party."

She gave a shake of her head. "I doubt it. I don't usually attend the monthly barbecues so I don't know any of the details."

"This year is special." Dex seemed determined to have his say. "We're helping David's church sponsor Miss Sophie's school."

"That's my school!" Chloe declared.

"I know it is, sweetheart." Despite his obvious discomfort in the face of Layne's lack of welcome, the man had a smile for her daughter. "I kinda think that's why Mr. Hart wanted to do this—'cause he has a special place in his heart for a certain little cutie with blonde curls."

Chloe giggled and scrunched up her shoulders. "Mr. Andrew calls me Little Angel."

Little Angel. There'd been a time when Layne would have given anything to hear someone...anyone refer to Chloe in that way. She ached for others to love her precious daughter as much as she did. But now it was too late. She couldn't afford to tear down the walls she'd built around Chloe and herself, whether it be for all the Heart's Haven residents or just the tall one standing in front of her.

"What's so different about this year?" Layne wanted to seem uninterested, but her natural curiosity made her ask.

"Well, as you know, most of the children at Miss Sophie's have special needs. Some of their families live under a whole lot o' financial stress, so every year The Falls Tabernacle organizes a Christmas party to help out. They take the kids someplace fun, then they provide presents from Santa. They've done it ever' year for...well, a long time. This year, with the whole economic thing goin' on, it's put a strain on the church's finances. Mr. Hart wanted Heart's Haven to help out, 'specially since Miss Sophie's school takes such good care of his little angel."

Dex poked Chloe's tummy, and she giggled again. Layne caught her breath and closed her eyes briefly against a sharp, almost-painful stab of longing. She couldn't bear to watch this wonderful man treat her