



TANYA
HANSON

*The
Heart of
A Stranger*

A HEARTS CROSSING RANCH PREQUEL
Christmas Story



The Heart of a Stranger

Tanya Hanson

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What People are Saying

Love at First Snow:

"Love the title. Enter cowboy Alex in Chapter 2, my heart sighed. All good stuff with a hearts Crossing Ranch warm ending."

~author LoRee Peery

Sanctuary: Winner of CoffeeTime Romance Recommended Read Award.

...two healing souls are beautifully drawn, such a perfect match you ache for them to find their way to each other.

~Marianne Evans, best-selling and award-winning author

The Heart of a Stranger is a very enjoyable read with an ending I didn't see coming. Even after heartbreak, love will endure. A good afternoon story on a cool winter day.

~Nancy Berkeland, avid reader

Dedication

To my beloved friend Carmen Harnish, singing in the angel choir this Christmas for the first time. I miss you.

1

Mountain Cove, Colorado
December 1876

The wooden headstones wobbled in the wind, like loose teeth caught in a sudden cough. Cold bit my skin even with Old Joe's coat belted tight around me. At first, his scents of soap, hard work, and peppermint drops had given me comfort, but now, the coat smelled musty and stale.

But I loved it and wore it anyway.

Dusk was falling fast. The last of the sun wrestled with storm clouds like new wounds and old bruises.

The advent chain I hung from one crooked tooth to another had come undone in the wind. This same time every afternoon, I came to rip off a loop. First big snowstorm of the season on its way. Of course we'd had flurries, ice, soft hail, and sleet since October, but nothing that stuck for long. I needed to hurry before the sun set all the way.

When I reached Old Joe's grave, I leaned over to kiss the humble marker. Old Joe had left his worldly goods to me, and I could well afford a marble tombstone. "You sure deserve better. I miss you, old man."

The family plot, surrounded by a few mixed pines and a stand of barren aspen, didn't give much protection from the weather. I shivered long and hard. The aspen, glorious green in summer and shimmering gold in the fall, were nothing but naked leafless skeletons now. Their bones pointed to the restless sky.

Off in the wind somewhere, hoof beats smacked the frozen trail. I didn't turn looking, wasn't worried. Upcoming storms always made my buckskin mare restless, but Clytemnestra would never leave me. Not even with flakes of hay awaiting back home. She was my mine, I was hers, and she knew it full well. In fact, my sweet girl snuffled in the cold air right now, close by.

"Those ribbons just gonna blow off in this wind. Get themselves covered by snow, all those pretty colors running when it melts." A deep male voice I didn't know hit my ears with the sting of a pelt of gravel.

My heart stopped. I didn't move, tried to think ahead. Memories of Old Joe had so overtaken my mind I hadn't even discerned between a strange horse and my own. I was both shamed and terrified. It hadn't been Clytemnestra's hooves at all. Who in the world was all the way out here, disrupting my peace?

Goose flesh popped through my skin, and nerves scattered across my spine like fleas. My rifle still hung along Clytemnestra's saddle, but I always had a knife inside my boot. Bears and wolves, just in case. But I was in the family cemetery, not the wilderness.

What heartless man would assault a mourner?

After a long cold second, I bent a little so as to

reach the knife should I need it. I eagle-eyed a dark hatted shadow, backlit against pink and purple clouds.

"You're trespassing, Mister Whoever-You-Are. Not to mention you're disturbing my grieving." My breath was hot against the cold, but my loud, steady voice amazed me, and apparently, even the stranger.

He hung his head rather like an abashed schoolboy. "Sorry, miss. I didn't mean to startle. I...I learned the whereabouts of Josephus Martin's last resting place in town, and I came to give him my respects."

"Pftttt," I scoffed, fear ebbing. "Everybody Old Joe knew paid respects at his funeral. More than a year ago."

My heart ached anew. His death had been sudden, his last rites thrown together in a day. Just a few mourners, and certainly no strangers or out-of-towners. Old Joe had liked his solitude, and a close handful of chums. And his little family. Oh, I'd loved him like we were blood, the man who'd married my grandmother a decade ago. My ninth birthday. And he'd loved me back, like his own true grandchild. Loved me enough to make me his rightful heir. My gaze stole over the other graves. Lavinia, his wife before my *abuelita*, her two little boys, Old Joe's own baby girl asleep in her mother's arms...

"I didn't know back then. And..." Suddenly he towered next to me, much taller than I'd expected, having stepped soft and soundless, like a cowboy. True, he wore a Stetson, but so did every man for a thousand miles any direction, cow man or not.

Preachers, doctors, lawyers. Barkeeps and butchers, bakers, outlaws and oftentimes, women. Good millinery for keeping out the sun and rain.

Truth was, the man's lovely scent of spruce and sun and rain hit me with the wind turning the air to winter. All the seasons, all at once. And I liked it, even with aspen branches groaning caution above me. I was in a graveyard, after all. With a side-glance, I peeked under his brim. He'd turned his head and caught some lukewarm sunlight.

Oh, dear, I wished I hadn't. Even accustomed as I was to handsome cowpokes and strong farmhands, this one stole my breath and turned it hotter. Carved cheekbones, strong Roman-shaped nose. Golden hair, shimmering in the dying light, dusted across wide shoulders, and a smile without the customary face warming whickers. He grinned like he might know my thoughts.

But I took no guff from anybody—Old Joe had taught me that from the get-go, and I wanted to back-talk, but something unusual clogged my throat for a second. Some kind of sparkle. I liked that, too. But still. A quick cough brought my words back.

"Mister, you are interrupting my private devotions. There's a storm coming, and I need to complete my prayers before dark."

"I'd say you're decorating for Christmas," he said, casual, not like he was poking fun. He bent to tuck a loose loop of my red and green chain against Vinnie's resting place. A tiny wooden cross barely showed above the frozen grass, to honor the baby girl sleeping

against her mama's bosom. Last thing Old Joe had expected, a healthy babe born in his old age.

Healthy until the diphtheria, that is.

"You'd be wrong, Mister," I sputtered, not sure of my thoughts or reactions and needing to take it out on him. "It's an Advent chain. I pull off one loop each day, recite a scripture and say a prayer for these lost too soon. And I light a candle in this Mason jar." I touched the jar with the toe of my boot.

He shrugged. "Wind'll just blow it out. Snow'll drown the flame"

I took personal offense. I'd started this tradition one year ago, my first Christmas without Old Joe. To honor his memory, to be sure, but it seemed disrespectful and mean not to include the others, despite we had never met. "Just who are you?"

"Who are *you*?" His voice turned suddenly hard.

This Nosy Nellie had no business here. I lifted my chin in disgust and well, some pride.

"I am Elena Montoya. Everybody for a hundred miles knows me. This is my ranch. They know that, too. Old Joe left it all to me. Everybody knows that, too. So, if *you* don't know it already, now you do. Who are you, I ask again, and why are *you* here? Now?"

He sighed deep, used those quiet boots to step close to Old Joe, and ran his fingers across the carvings. *Josephus M. C. Martin, 1801-1875 Died in Christ*

"Name's James Conrad." He was so still, so quiet for so long I wondered if he'd frozen to death. Then he moved and stared into my eyes. I stared back. My eyelids must have frozen too, because I couldn't blink

or look away. And my insides fluttered in a funny way.

“Found out not long ago, Josephus Martin was married to *my* grandmother.”

Shock like I’d stepped on a nail started up my legs and spine to lock my jaw. It took a while to find the means to speak.

I unclenched my jaw. “He was married to mine. And had just one wife before her.” I pointed a shaking finger at Vinnie’s grave. “You’re not just a trespasser but an imposter. I need you to go, and now.”

The stranger stayed put, calm, still. “She died young, my grandmother. Long before Josephus came here. To Colorado.”

Liar! Old Joe had taught me many skills just in case. So now, I reckoned I could make Clytemnestra and my rifle in less than a leap of six, seven, long steps. The stranger didn’t seem threatening, yet, but he seemed bent on staking some kind of claim. He was bundled against the cold, too hard to see if he wore a gun, but unimaginable if he didn’t. He was a man, after all. I raised a knee to run.

Calm, he shook his head. “I mean you no harm, Miss Elena. Not your grandma neither.” Then his head moved in a half circle, like he was surveying the boundaries of the ranch. My ranch, surrounded by a cove of tall hills spiked with mixed pine, and beyond, the silver spires of the Rocky Mountains.

My ranch.

I took the chance and dug quick to get my fold-up sodbuster knife. My gift from Old Joe the Christmas I turned ten. By the time the stranger’s daydream ended,

I had moved close enough on tiptoe to stick the blade under his chin. My, he was tall. Back in the moment, he gasped.

“Mr. Conrad, you’ve said your good-byes to Old Joe. Now, I suggest you leave *my* ranch now. Trust me. Old Joe taught me well how to use this knife. You best believe I can stab something important.”

He chuckled, and the sound made me want to use the knife more than ever. Even though I’d only practiced on scarecrows and melons. I ground my teeth against the urge.

“My, you’re a feisty one. I’ll leave you to your prayers then. You do seem one of tender faith.” His eye roll glinted with a tease in the last of the sun, the ray more grey than gold. But his hair still glowed.

He gently shoved my knife away. “I will be paying a call on your grandma. You best know, I got proof.”

A blast of wind shoved sudden snow against my eyes. With a quick salute, the stranger dashed back to his horse so fast he left a tail of snowflakes. He waved once more as he mounted and rode off. Big panniers stuffed with belongings banged against his legs, like he might be toting everything he owned. How far had he come? Watching him, I couldn’t move, but my knees jiggled like jelly beneath Old Joe’s overalls.

I leaned against his grave. Snowflakes began a new, gentler ballet across my face, chilling my fear even more. All the while, my heart pounded my ribs like Eben Smith’s stamp mill, the legendary noisemaker all the miners still crowed about. Even Old Joe, who had tried mining once upon a long time ago.

The sun set just about all the way now, with just a wisp of dusk lightening the winter evening.

What had the stranger said? Proof? My heart iced over. What on earth did James Conrad mean? If that was even his name. What proof could he possibly have?

Or was he truly a liar and a scoundrel thinking to take advantage of two defenseless females? Snow started to dump hard all over, and full, like it had waited for James Conrad to finish speaking his nonsense.

I ground my teeth again, then laughed a bitter sound. Nothing helpless or defenseless about Abuelita and me.

Fear did claw at me again, though. Could he possibly be a threat? But I took time to light the candle in the Mason jar and set the little beacon by Old Joe's grave, rather sideways against the wind. I prayed the wind wouldn't kill the flame, nor the snow, mostly to spite James Conrad Whoever He Truly Was.

Lights already winked from the ranch, and my fear vanished. God had long protected Abuelita and me, provided for us, even while *Abuelo* Luciano was alive, my mama vanished, and we three roamed with no place to go. The stranger *had* promised no harm, and even if he meant any, Hector, Old Joe's trusted ranch boss, was twice his size, twenty times as loud, and he wore a gun to boot. Maybe two.

With a sigh, I counted the rest of my advent loops. Three more until Christmas Eve.

Which meant ten days until the New Year. My

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heart beat fast. What would the next year bring? 1875 had taken Old Joe from me. This year had seen the President grant statehood to our territory on the centennial of the Declaration of Independence. Then there was the presidential election and its rancor: our brand-new state of Colorado supposedly made the difference in electing President Hayes.

What next?

2

Old Joe had buried Vinnie not more than a half mile from his homestead. A stone's throw, he called it, so she wasn't too far away. Along the trail home, lights in the ranch house windows flickered like eyelashes blinking away the snowflakes. It wasn't a fancy place, a log house weathered and careworn. But warm inside during the winter, cool enough in summer, and always with a full larder.

Of course, Clytemnestra could have found her way back with her blinders on. Me, blindfolded as well. Through the blackest night or whitest squall, both of us. But I held back her trot. The lustrous snow fell quick, constant, covering rocks, roots, even holes. Even though I didn't want any missteps or surprises, I regretted having to curb her spirit. Same as Old Joe had never held back mine. But I knew my girl trusted me and knew I wasn't about to control her...her feistiness.

Feisty. My heart hammered along with her hoof beats. The stranger's own word nearly halted my anger. At least my ire warmed me up. Feisty. I liked it. He hadn't dubbed me naughty, unladylike, rowdy, impertinent, or any of the other unflattering descriptions against high-spirited females I'd heard

even from Abuelita. Feisty. It meant determined. Lively. His word didn't dim my fears that he was up to nothing good, but at any rate, he didn't think me wayward or impudent or unnatural for standing up for what was mine.

Close to home, happy for hay and stall, Clytemnestra whinnied, her head shaking away snow. Our ranch boss Hector stood atop the porch step like the Colossus of Rhodes, massive arms crossed across an even more massive chest. I shuddered with more than winter. With his face wet with snow and dark with fury, I gathered he'd already met the stranger.

Indeed, one of our hands, Temogen, wrestled with James Conrad's horse. A gust bounced the bulging panniers, knocking away the snow. The spotted gelding shook his head like Clytemnestra had done. The horses were eager for their supper, too. I dismounted and thanked Tem as he led both horses to their mealtime, singing a Christmas carol to calm James Conrad's mustang.

"Hector, you look as cranky as a hungry bear," I said, trying to calm my own nerves. My voice didn't shake, at least, but I couldn't say the same for my knees.

He grumbled out a mild oath before he spoke. "There's some outsider alone in the house with your gram," he growled. "I reckon to keep close should she need me."

Abuelita was the strongest person I knew and doubted she needed anybody's help, but I nodded just to keep the peace. He definitely believed men should

rule the roost. Through new drifts, I walked over to him, batting snow from my cheeks. "Well, why don't you come on in and see for yourself? You'll freeze out here."

"The lady of the house didn't invite me in," he said with some petulance.

"Well, I'm a lady of the house, too, and I *am* inviting you in."

He beamed at me like sunrise.

"Come on. Supper's probably ready."

Now his face clouded. "Already et with the hands in the bunkhouse."

"A cup of coffee then. And I smelled her chokecherry pie earlier today."

Like a happy child, he reached down an enormous hand to help me up the icy step. Hector had been part of the ranch for twenty years or more. I reckoned him in his early forties, although he never seemed to change. No smidges of grey in his long hair or mustache.

"You look like an old man now, with snow stuck all over your face and hair," I teased at the front door, but when I opened it, my humor fled. James Conrad stood by the big river rock fireplace. He studied an old daguerreotype of Old Joe as a young man, maybe to see if there was a resemblance between them at a similar age. The room was bright enough. The fire blazed. Candles and oil sconces bloomed everywhere.

For some fool reason, just seeing James started up sparkles again, from my toes to the tip of my nose. For a flash, he seemed to belong right there.

And I liked it even though I shouldn't. He didn't belong here at all. Yet some displeasure stewed. Sure enough he'd heard me enter but hadn't even tossed me a glance.

Confused, I sloughed off my boots and coat. To my right, Abuelita sliced bread at the big eating table in the kitchen that had once been Old Joe's entire cabin. When he'd married Vinnie, he'd built them a small bedroom sharing a wall with the original structure, adding the bigger room to the left. A ladder near the fireplace led to the loft he'd made for Vinnie's two little sons. The loft was now my nest, giving me a smidge of space and privacy all my own.

"We've got a guest for supper," Abuelita said, not looking up from her big knife. An oil lamp shined in her pale, yellow hair, and I noticed the first few strands of grey. The lamplight made them seem like silver streaks. She was and would ever remain a beauty.

I sniffed, some of it melting snow up my nose. "I see him. We met at the graves, and I think he brings trouble."

She nodded, and her fingers tightened against the knife handle. Our gazes knitted together. "He mentioned his purpose. Josephus didn't much like people, but he'd never turn someone away, especially in weather like this."

Hector cleared his throat behind me, having tossed off his own boots.

"Already et, ma'am." He nodded to us both. "I'll just set myself here, case you need. It just ain't proper, two ladies left alone with...somebody they do not

know.”

He was probably right, even though Abuelita and I were strong and smart. Hector settled in the big rocker by the front door. It normally occupied the porch during the warmer months. I loved rocking away my cares, the Rockies smiling down in the distance. No matter my mood or cares, just the sight brought the Lord to mind whenever I lifted my eyes unto His hills.

Part of me wanted summer right then. Then this would all be over.

Abuelita beckoned me over, a frown tightening her forehead. “You might want to tussy up a bit, girl, being that we have a guest.” She gestured to Old Joe’s damp, somewhat tattered garments. “A dress might do for a start.”

I groaned. She made her disapproval loud and clear every day, now that I’d taken over Old Joe’s wardrobe. According to her, trousers were not ladylike, even though they made sense to me. Why must women slosh long skirts around in slush and mud? Why ride sidesaddle? Besides, astride a horse wearing trousers was better than hitching up a skirt and revealing stockings and ankles. Why didn’t women have more sense?

But I headed up to my loft without argument. I realized her point when I caught my reflection in the old mottled mirror on my wall. She’d hung it up for me when Old Joe bought her a fine cheval standing mirror one Christmas. I looked weathered and careworn myself.

The water in my washbasin never froze, thanks to the tall chimney so nearby, so I cleaned up and climbed into my Sunday best. Not because it was the best—well, that was partially true because I did look pretty wearing it, but because of its warmth. The purple and gold plaid wool dress buttoned up the front, fitting fine over my female shape.

My hair tucked inside Old Joe's knitted cap fell down my back, surprisingly untangled. Vanity or not, its auburn waves made my dress look fine, too. I dashed it into a long tail, and stuck my feet into the soft fur slippers given to Abuelita by a Kiowa friend long ago.

I took one last glance, pinched my cheeks and bit my lips, not displeased with the outcome. And for what? I grunted. A fine-looking man full of lies and prevarications? Who didn't even bother with a *hey* when I walked in.

But right now, his eyes lit up when he saw me at the bottom rung. And I liked it.

Even though I shouldn't.

Hector snoozed in the big rocking chair while Abuelita sat the rest of us at the table. Tender beef roast and a mountain of mashed potatoes steamed from her best plates. After a delicate placement of a napkin on her lap, her hand poised over her food, when James coughed gently.

"Would you mind, ma'am, us saying thanks to the Lord, for this fine feast?"

My mouth hung open. Abuelita's cheeks reddened, but she looked pleased. Did she imagine a