



THEY ARE BOUND BY DUTY.
CAN LOVE REWRITE FATE?

ON THE FEAST OF *Stephen*

A MEDIEVAL CHRISTMAS ROMANCE

TANYA HANSON

On the Feast of Stephen

A Medieval Christmas
Tale

Tanya Hanson

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Dedication

To Tim with love...
51 and still the one

What People are Saying

Heart of a Stranger

A beautiful story in a beautiful setting....couldn't put it down. The author has crafted a captivating story.
~ 5 stars Bookwoman Reviews

[Heart of a Stranger] is well-written and engaging with some surprising twists and turns. ~ Karen Malley

Love at First Snow

Enter cowboy Alex...and my heart sighed. Enter a missing uncle, a threat against the ranch, and a family scare... all good stuff with a warm Hearts Crossing Ranch ending. ~author LoRee Peery

1

The air in the great hall suffocated her. Smoke from the Yule log swirled in dirty clouds. The stink of spilled ale rose from the floor, despite the fresh herbs Alisoun had strewn across the thick rugs woven of river rushes.

Elbows on the table, Alisoun covered her ears against the merrymaking. Both grief and frustration grabbed her. The earl and his heir—her father and brother, had died in battle. Now her mother and uncle kept charge of Fickewirth.

And her. She shivered then, with dread. A withered old man would soon be her husband.

The silken hem of her pale yellow gown puddled around her feet like spilled honey. In truth, Christmas Eve was a joyous time, but the eels boiled in wine turned her stomach. And her throat protested against the hot beer mulled with apples.

Next to her on the dais, her mother's brother leered, his eyes glimmering. His gaze strolled up and down her gown, with the look of a covetous man ready to offer on a well-bred horse. "You are most lovely tonight. The embroiderer has done well in decorating your *bliaut*."

She made a face and flicked her thumbnails at the

elaborate designs of her dress.

"Uncle, there are enough pearls here to feed a peasant and his family for a lifetime."

He scowled back. "It is worthy of your station."

"You should have left me at the convent." She had no vocation whatsoever, but the simplicity of the priory suited her, for her grief was not yet done. And she'd be spared marriage at least for a little while.

"You have your mother's beauty. Your father's wit. You were not meant to be a nun."

"Nor the wife of a drooling fool." She swirled ale around her cup and shivered anew at her uncle's stare.

He smirked into his wine. "Yet the chatelaine of a great estate. The convent was suitable for your contemplation upon your father's death. But it has been nigh two years. And..." He grabbed her forearm, his grip hard, angry, and uncompromising. "...your marriage to Whitsell is what your father wanted."

She flinched at his touch. "So I am told. But there was no betrothal ceremony," she reminded him for the thousandth time. "No written contracts. My name is found nowhere. And I wear no betrothal ring."

Her uncle glared at her and spat out a dribble of words she didn't comprehend. His fingers tightened. "This foolishness again? Lord Whitsell took ill. There was not time nor opportunity for a proper ceremony before your father left for Bovines. The agreement is struck, and binding by their clasped hands."

But not mine! Her heart pounded with despair. In truth, women of her station married by arrangement, with no choice in their bridegrooms. And this was a

most advantageous match for Fickewirth's empty coffers, approved by King John himself. Still, Alisoun would not concede quietly. Not to her greedy uncle at least.

"Why should I pay the price?" she hissed. "I had nothing to do with my father's decision to fund John's wars." She crossed her arms.

He cackled, loud against the noise of the festivities. "You should be grateful for your father's sacrifices. The king trusts few, but he trusts us. It is your turn to forfeit."

Irate at his smugness, she rose so fast she toppled her cup, then bent to his ear. "As if the rotting bones of my father and brother are not sacrifice enough! And what have you given up, uncle? You seem to manage." She waved tense arms around the great hall.

Indeed, her mother's brother Durwin, a second son who had inherited nothing, lived quite well in her father's place. Accruing debts her sick mother ignored and, Alisoun scowled, debts left to her to repay.

Just then, across the crowded room, her gaze collided with a man she'd not seen before. Because if she had, she'd have seen him every time she closed her eyes.

Knees weak, she backed against the handcarved chair where her mother once reigned. Alisoun's hand fluttered to cover her heart. The stranger's beauty staggered her. A knight? A lord? A foreign duke or prince? Enemy? Spy? Oh, surely not. Although staring was immodest, her gaze could not drink in enough of him.

Neither of them moved. He leaned against a long table as if deciding whether to sit. His surcoat, heavy black silk woven with silver threads, bespoke considerable expense. In the torchlight, emeralds blinked at the buckle on his waist.

Oh, her heart quivered. In a better time, another life, might not their parents have...

Then, his gaze found hers and lingered. Time stood still. Her breathing stopped. Her pulse thundered and dimmed the noise of the crowded room.

His gaze traveled her form, seemed to pause at every pearl. Heat coursed through her. His eyelids flickered, and she released her trapped breath. Did he deem her luxury gluttonous? Or did he appreciate the embellishments of her station?

He bowed to her and broke the connection, and then began to converse with a squire of sorts. Her breath caught so hard in her throat she all but strangled. With that one look, she knew.

He was the one.

But what of her father's promise to Whitsell? "Who is he?" She nudged her uncle.

"Who?" Her uncle gave no notice of her bewitchment, too busy with a tiny pie.

Politely, she pointed with a vague description, but not in time. The stranger's dark mantle billowed around him, and his long strides took him to the massive doors. Several knights followed him out.

Her uncle shrugged. "All are welcome on this night."

The doors slammed closed, and all traces of the stranger disappeared into the night.

He left her! With a thud, she sank next to her uncle, hands flapping in her lap like the wings of a dying bird.

The magic ended, and her spirits soured anew.

“What is it? Alisoun, are you feeling faint?” Her uncle placed in her hand one of the tiny pies, stuffed with minced meats and spices and baked in a rectangle to represent the Infant’s manger bed. In lieu of her ill mother, she’d directed the kitchens herself and knew of its tastiness. “Eat it. I know Whitsell. He wants a robust bride.”

His eyes glistened, and her fingers itched to scratch away Durwin’s lewd smile.

She choked down a bite and grasped for a prayer. Was it selfish to ask for such? Release from the betrothal? Meeting the stranger again? She swallowed before the prayer took shape.

“Keep good cheer.” Her uncle laughed out loud. “Milord Whitsell never recovered his health and has lived years past his due. Soon you shall be a wealthy widow.”

“What a vile thing to say. I wish not to be Lord Whitsell’s wife, but I wish him no harm. My father loved him.” At her uncle’s blasphemous words, she loosened some of her wrath. “You need penance, Uncle. Find Friar Marc at once.”

“I take no orders from you.” He clenched his fist and she wondered, had they been private, if he’d actually strike her. Instead, he splayed his fingers and

chuckled. Her uncle leaned close, peered into her face, his breath vinegary with wine. "You think the same in your secret heart, dear daughter..."

"We are kin, but I am *not* your daughter!"

He shrugged thin shoulders under a green satin surcoat that had once been her father's. "With your mother ill, I am in charge. You will wed whomever we choose, and John agrees. And so it shall happen come Saint Stephen's Day. Make peace with this."

Peace? With her soul still stirred by the stranger? Her fingers tensed.

Her uncle leaned back in her father's chair, and she hated the sight of him there. "The feast you've arranged is magnificent." He belched. "The tutelage with Viscountess Bronckdon has prepared you well. You will be a marvelous wife."

"I want the priory." Although she didn't. Not really. But given the options—

"You will wed Whitsell." Durwin shoved a clump of Christmas frumenty between his tense, angry lips. The fruited pudding seemed to relax him. "You will not disappoint your mother."

No. That she would not do. This awful man aimed at her weak spot.

Alisoun rose. "I..."

"Where are you bound? You've eaten naught but a single bite." Her uncle's eyes slitted.

Concern? Hardly.

"I have no appetite."

"The mummerly commences soon."

"I care not for the glut of entertainment." She

leaned down and whispered a hard tone. "I find myself in need of absolution for *my* disrespect, for that is all I feel for you. I accept my husband, but I cannot accept you, bloodline or no. I am bound for the chapel and our priest."

As she headed out of the great hall, she strode carefully, for the cold stones were slippery. Her soft calfskin slippers made no sound. The chapel was the only place she could be alone. Scullions and pages and serving maids and tire-women and mummers scuttled in every direction. Her nerves screamed.

She entered the servant's door to their lower floor of the chapel. Her family worshiped from the upper level.

She heard him before she saw him.

"Dómine, exáudi oratiónem meam."

Lord, hear my prayer...

She answered, as she'd done so many times at the abbey.

"Et clamor meus ad te véniat."

Let my cry come before Thee.

"Friar Marc?" But as her eyes suited themselves to the candlelight, she realized it was not the family priest kneeling at the *prie dieu*, murmuring his beads. It was him!

"Peace, lady. I mean no harm."

He rose, tall and stalwart, wearing confidence and strength like chain mail armor.

It was him. The stranger who had stolen a heart she was not permitted to give.

"Who are you?" Her words emerged almost

without sound because now, delight had stolen her breath.

"Merely a guest, lady." He did not proffer his name, but politely inclined his head. Long black hair drifted over his shoulders like a curtain.

Blood stuttered through her veins. That she may not know his name did not surprise her. Before the convent, she had spent much time away from Fickewirth with Vicountess Bronckdon, learning to be a great lady. And indeed guests traversed countless miles for Christmas.

And for her wedding. *Her wedding.*

Despite his beautiful countenance, her fear surged. Her skin goosed. King John's toadies figured significantly among the guests, but so might his spies. Fickewirth was loyal, but...was this stranger an enemy after all, unwilling to reveal his identity?

"Please, kind gentleman," she invited, cautious. "Guests take more comfort at a holiday table than a chapel."

"Aye, Fickewirth hospitality is known far and wide." He shook his head. The black drape of hair shone in the candles' glow.

Her heart thudded; her fingers itched to touch it.

"But I am not comfortable in great halls. I pray for courage." His voice in the shadows floated across the clammy air like a fresh breeze.

"Courage? Most men seek courage in the joust or in battle, not a Christmas fête."

The scent of the rosemary, amongst the greenery gracing the altarpiece, hung in the cold air.

Still the man said nothing.

Still she stayed.

Their gazes blended until he reached toward a garland of ivy. "The church disdains it." His voice trembled. "For it is the plant of Bacchus. But the holly..."

"I know. It is the crown of thorns, and the red of the berries, Christ's blood." She bowed her head before looking at him again. "I am devout in my way as well."

He nodded but said nothing.

"Why seek you courage?" she managed, hating that something she couldn't have drew her to him.

His hands rested gently on his buckle, not curled around weapons. His voice held not the tone of knightly arrogance.

"I am to fulfill a vow."

A vow? Her heart sank. Yet...

I am to fulfill a vow as well. But she didn't speak aloud. She ached for him to leave so she could sob out her soul. Even as she wanted him to stay. She found her voice, her manners. "Supper is served."

"Yet you are here as well," he whispered.

She could not find words to explain her desperation, and lowered her head in modesty. "Barnacle goose and other good foods will relieve the fasting of Advent."

Mayhap one day she would be open to romance. Like the ladies in the jongleur's songs. But not now. Not promised to an elderly man.

The stranger bowed as he had in the great hall. He stalked slowly to her, their gazes entwined like before.

She did not tell him of the marriage, could not. For telling him anything at all was not possible. With him so near, his beauty stole her breath with far more vigor than before.

Then he laid his hand under her elbow, as any proper lord did a lady, and led her back into the hallway.

Older than she, he was yet young, although some worry had creased the bridge of his nose with tiny lines. Torches flickered in his eyes, grey like clouds before rain. Taller by far than her own father had been, he had smooth white skin with shadows of whiskers, and that long black hair cascading from his head.

Knees shaking, she reached for a soaring hammerbeam pillar. She knew her role and accepted it, but despaired on this Christmas Eve that she had no say in a husband.

Wished for this man instead. Shame laved her.

His fine large hand emerged from his mantle to touch the plaits circling her ears. He wore a ruby ring that gleamed in the torchlight.

Alisoun's lips parted. Heat pumped through her veins.

Why was she so warm? The castle's corridors were dank and chill year round, yet her skin flamed. Without thinking, she took her own hand and placed it on his left cheek.

"Waes hael." He spoke low, in the old tongue.

"And good health to you as well," she responded, again with hardly any sound at all.

The heralds blew horns, announcing the

pageantry. The stranger came to life. With gentle fingers, he pried her hand from his cheek, but didn't release it. He gazed down at her lips.

Would he kiss her? Oh, how she wanted it and did not care that a kiss on the mouth was a dreadful misbehavior.

Slow, somehow awkward, like a newborn foal wobbling to its knees, he brought her wrist to his mouth. Blood in her veins sparked to her toes and pounded against his lips.

As she gasped, he dropped her hand and backed away to leave. He held out a sprig of rosemary and handed it to her, then turned away.

Rosemary. For remembrance.

Then he ran, a flash of black down a dark hall. The inside of her wrist still pounded where his lips had grazed her skin. She placed her own mouth where his had been. The nameless man who had stolen her heart, but not in time.

Amazed, bereft. Her heart heaved beneath the golden silk. From inside her sleeve. she pulled a fine square of fabric meant for a snuffle and wrapped the rosemary sprig inside. Tonight, and every night hereafter, she would sleep with it under her pillow. To dream of him and hold off the stench of the drooling fool.

She shuddered but not from the cold. Reached out her hand, but he was long gone.

2

Kitt grabbed the mug of church ale he'd purchased on the outside steps of Saint Edmund's. One sip of the strong drink, brewed by the parish and sold only at Christmastide, spread warmth beneath his grandsire's mantle. Around him, the Whitsell knights swayed with the swilling they'd already done at the inn and stumbled into Midnight mass.

He set down the rest of the ale, so as to keep his wits about him. For he wanted to see her again. Why had he run from her at sunset, at evening meal? Had the monastery become such a part of him to spike such nerves in a woman's presence?

Or was it his situation as a man betrothed to someone else? Had the sudden flames in his heart incited guilt?

In the narthex, he surveyed the congregants entering the parish church. Disappointment swamped him even on this glorious night. For she never arrived.

She. The beauty who had captured his heart when he'd least expected to lose it. *She*, whose absence all but staggered him. Mayhap she'd remained back at the castle, worshipping in the chapel where they had first met. Or outside in the hall, where he had settled for kissing her hand when he yearned to kiss her lips.

His spirits darkened. How could he long for such things? Mayhap the monks of Mildgyth were right. The impious lure and wantonness of womankind had been drummed into Kitt's ears since his early days at the cloister. Shame heated through the thick mantle as he remembered her nearness, smelled once again the rosemary on the air and the perfume of her hair.

Then he shook all over. Like never before, he longed for the the priory. For there he knew what to do, what to accept. What to expect.

Until Sir Gylbard.

He stepped inside the parish church for worship, for absolution. Heartbeat plodded in his chest in rhythm with a chant. From the west end, a trio of good folk and their younglings walked an ox, a donkey, and a cow up front to a niche. Around him, murmurs of the worshippers explained how the friendly beasts were there to warm the holy Babe with their breath. *All the beasts speak in Latin, so all with other tongues can understand*, came a response.

Kitt's head ached. The story of Christmas went on around him. Oh, he appreciated Salvation, and adored the Lord and His mother, but his heart hurt, too. Fear thrummed through him. In two days, he was to wed.

He, abandoned in infancy, raised to become a monk. About to become a husband.

Kitt crossed himself in haste and stumbled out into the snow, wobbly and in desperate need of forgiveness. In desperate need of air to quell his swelling panic. Cold wind tossed the edges of the mantle like bat wings.

From the plod of noisy footfalls behind him, Kitt knew his grandsire's steward Sir Gylbard followed him down the snowy path. Gylbard. Trusted companion who had carried his grandsire's gonfalon, a pennant of five gold rings, into battle at Arsuf.

And, yes, Kitt himself trusted the man with his life. Even if...all of this was Gylbard's fault. The steward should have let Kitt be. Truth, he had never felt any urgency to take vows, but he had never lived or learned the world beyond Mildgyyth's walls. Other oblates sometimes received visitors, but never him.

Anger and hopelessness swirled. Kitt lurched from a patch of ice but easily found his horse, tethered at a rail. Past midnight, but stars and moon lit the sky of Christmas Day.

Just standing near the massive destrier got his muscles screaming. So different from the humble donkey he'd ridden to deliver documents he'd penned in the scriptorium.

Yet Gylbard and the rest, the Whitsell men-at-arms, had worked a miracle in just four weeks. Even the horse had accepted Kitt from the start. But, Kitt snorted, seating a near-monk was an easier challenge than the mounting of a chainmail-clad knight during battle.

"My lord Birkitt." Gylbard addressed him, tall and stately in his way. "I suggest with all humility we return to Fickewirth. We have been made welcome already once tonight." The old man gently held out cupped hands so Kitt could mount.

Once again indignity laved him, and he prayed no

one else was nearby to witness his greenness. He was not meant for knightly goings-on.

"The tavern's inn is not the place for you, milord," Gylbard said, firm.

"No Fickewirth. The tavern will do." Kitt could not bear to see her again, whoever she was. And they'd been fortunate to slip in without the heralds' notice, the first time. No loud announcement of his name or rank. "Fickewirth is expecting my grandsire. I must remain anonymous until, you know. You yourself said the bride has met Lord Whitsell." His legs ached against the saddle.

"*Your* bride," The steward said, gentle again, clambered atop his own mount. "And *you* are Lord Whitsell."

"But the promised bridegroom died three months ago. And his death kept secret." Kitt tried to keep his voice low, to halt his panic from choking him.

"You needed to be found." Gylbard said in a flat voice. "I suspected you lived, for we never found your grave. Your lady mother—" He chose careful words, "—was a sly one, God shrive her soul." He crossed himself. "I tasked myself to find you. My loyalty to your grandsire could not allow Whitsell to pass intestate to the king."

The frigid air blew sense back into Kitt. Leaving Gylbard's side, he reined the horse toward the village.

In truth, Gylbard repeated himself many times a day on these same subjects, as though Kitt's mind was as ancient and muddled as his grandsire's. Or...Kitt wondered with a little chill. As though Gylbard needed