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Troubadour

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Mary Hoffman

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Chapter One

Love Song

The hill town of Sévignan was not at the heart of a great estate. Lanval de Sévignan was only a minor landowner but within the walls of his town, he was the absolute lord. And within his castle, his word was law.

Except, he sometimes felt, when it came to his older daughter. His lady, Clara, was an exemplary wife; she had borne him first a son, Aimeric, and then two daughters, Elinor and Alys. And though Lord Lanval might have preferred one more son, to be certain that his name would be carried on, no further pregnancies had been successful and he was content with his lot. Aimeric was a healthy, strong sixteen-year-old, skilled at arms and ready to defend his home or that of any local noble who called on him.

Alys at eleven was really the only one still a child. But even Elinor at thirteen was far from grown up or ready to be married, either in temperament or suitability. She was headstrong, opinionated and always at war with her mother. There were times when both her parents felt that she should have been a boy. And she was passionate. Lanval was sure that she had cast immodest looks at several of his knights, including three youngsters he was fostering for another local landowner, who was richer in sons than the Lord of Sévignan.

Perhaps Elinor *should* be married, thought her father, but at present he had more serious matters to worry about. He already had a troupe of *joglar*s and their troubadour wintering with him, but a few days ago Bertran de Miramont had arrived unexpectedly. It was unusual for him to change courts in January. As soon as Bertran rode into the bailey, Lanval had known it meant bad news.

But it was worse than he had feared: the Papal Legate murdered and the Count of Toulouse suspected! Bertran had ridden hard on the heels of the attacker but lost him in Beaucaire.

'You didn't tell the monks your name, did you?' had been Lanval's first question.

'They didn't ask, sire.'

'What about the ferryman?'

'He knows me well enough. I travel often to Saint-Gilles when I am based at Count Alfonso's court in Arles.'

'And how long before news of the murder reaches Rome?' asked Lanval.

'Not long,' said Bertran. 'And then we must all be on our guard.'

Elinor was trying to learn to dance the *estampida* but her feet kept getting tangled up in the hem of her dress. What was even more galling was that Alys was doing it perfectly. Today was a saint's day – the Feast of Saint Bertran of Saint-Quentin – and there would be dancing and music and a fine dinner in their father's great hall. Elinor would make her first appearance there as a young woman. Alys was too young to

attend and join in the dancing but, since she was not only neater-footed but also taller than her older sister, Elinor wished with all her heart she could absent herself and send Alys in her place.

Not that Elinor would – or could – really stay away. She would have just preferred to watch from the dark alcove where she had always been a keen observer of the court's entertainments, where she and her sister had eavesdropped on music and poetry from an early age: the hiding-place from which she had first seen Bertran de Miramont.

Elinor still could not believe that Bertran was here, in the castle, on his own name day. She had been expecting a wait of months, till he returned in the spring. But a day or two earlier, some heightened instinct had taken her up on to the walls that enclosed the castle keep.

She was often restless these days, feeling that her childhood was disappearing fast and fearful for the future she must face as a woman, and a noblewoman at that. The evening was cold and she clutched her long fur-lined cloak close around her. She must expect to be married by fourteen at the latest, even though her parents had said nothing to her about it yet. The presentation of her in the great hall as *donzela* of the castle was just the beginning.

Elinor spent no time, like Alys, wondering who her husband might be. She knew that once her father made up his mind, she would have no choice. Or, more likely once her mother's mind settled on a suitable man. He would be older, much older, that was certain. Men of the Languedoc did not marry till they were in their thirties and their brides were commonly half their age. And it was usually only the oldest sons who married. Her brother, Aimeric, might have all his

years so far over again before he stood in the great cathedral at Béziers with a young woman at his side.

Elinor sighed. Not for the first time, she wished she had been born a boy. Then she could have been a knight and as second son wouldn't have had to marry. She could have joined another lord's household and lounged about flirting with the prettiest serving-maids and eating copious amounts of mutton.

But it was no good repining over what couldn't be changed. She had more or less two choices: marry or go into a convent. She had to smile at the thought of being a nun. Her mother would scorn the very idea. But not as much as she would mock at the name of Bertran of Miramont. Troubadours were all very well in their way and were often noblemen, even if only younger sons. Bertran was a great favourite with Lady Clara and the other women of Lanval's household but also had the knack of making himself pleasing to the house knights and lordlings. Lady Clara enjoyed his compositions more than those of any other poet. As the Lord's wife, she was his *domna*, his inspiration for love poems and the mistress of his heart – at least on paper. And he was her indulged favourite.

But marry her daughter to him? Out of the question. That was one of Lady Clara's favourite phrases where her older daughter was concerned and Elinor could hear her mother's voice in her head as she paced the battlements. 'Marry a troubadour? Out of the question!'

And that was when she had seen him, riding full pelt towards the castle. She would have known Bertran's horse and colours anywhere. Elinor had hurried down from the walls but there was no further sight of him that night. She

had caught glimpses of his familiar moss green velvet jerkin once or twice since but it was tonight at the feast that she was bound to see him.

And perhaps dance opposite him. The very thought tripped her disobedient feet again and it was the dancing master's turn to sigh.

Perrin was a *joglar*, one of the troupe of minstrels wintering at Sévignan. He was used to singing Bertran's new compositions but like everyone else was surprised to see him turning up so early in the year. It was only a short time before the poet sought him out and took him into the stables where they could talk without being overheard.

'Murdered?' said Perrin, horrified at the news. He was a young man, little more than a boy, but quick to realise what this meant for heretics like themselves. 'Vengeance will be swift!'

'And bloody,' agreed Bertran. 'I must not stay but will leave as soon as the saint's day is over. Someone must take the news to more of our brothers and sisters.'

'But what can they do?' asked Perrin.

'They can warn the Believers,' said Bertran, lowering his voice even further. He looked watchfully round the stable, unsure whether the slight clink of harness he heard had been caused by the January wind. 'And all sympathisers,' he added. 'We must learn to dissemble.'

'What reason are you giving for coming back to court now?' asked the *joglar*. 'I mean the official reason.'

'Why,' said Bertran, smiling and talking in a normal voice.

'I have written a song for my *domna* that could not wait. And you must learn it by tonight.' Then he added in a whisper. 'I shall take the same song to courts all over the south and many a *joglar* will have to learn it just as quickly.'

As soon as the dancing lesson was over, Elinor sneaked down to the kitchens to find out what was to be served at the great saint's day feast. Hugo the cook was sweating over the pans, roaring orders to the kitchen boys to fetch more firewood, stir the frumenty and turn the spits. Elinor turned her eyes away from the rotating corpses of sheep and deer; she hated to look at them but the savoury smell coming from the roasting flesh made her mouth fill with water and her stomach grumble.

Above the shouting and the clanging and the general kitchen chaos, she could hear the sad notes of the rebec. In a dark corner was the familiar figure of Huguet the *joglar*. 'Little Hugo' his name meant, to distinguish him from the cook. The *joglar* spent so much of his time in the kitchen, especially in the winter, because he felt the cold badly, that Hugo and all the other servants took him for granted. He was as much a fixture as the powderer, who spent his days pounding lumps of salt into fine crystals.

And he and Elinor had been friends for years; the *joglar* was only a few months older than her.

Elinor picked her way across to Huguet, automatically lifting her skirts out of the grease and blood on the floor. As soon as he caught her eye he stood and made a formal bow.

'Oh, don't stop playing, Huguet,' she said. 'Pretend I'm not here.'

That was impossible for servants, Elinor knew well. Her very presence in the kitchen made them tense, carrying out their duties more meticulously. Hugo wiped the sweat from his brow before rolling out the pastry for his capon pies. The spit boys stood up straight and turned more regularly, as if afraid she would inspect their work.

Huguet began to play again, softly.

'What is that tune?' asked Elinor, wondering how to broach the subject of Bertran.

'It is to accompany the new *canso*,' said Huguet. 'An old tune tricked out new, as a maid might put a fresh ribbon on an old dress. There is no time for Perrin or me to write a new one. De Miramont wants it for his new song tonight.'

'Oh,' said Elinor casually. 'Is he here then? It's early in the year for him to change court.'

Huguet grinned. He and every other musician, singer, dancer and acrobat in the castle knew perfectly well that the Lady Elinor had eyes for no one but the handsome troubadour. But she was young and de Miramont was an appealing prospect. Few people knew that his secret meant he was unlikely ever to marry, even though his songs were all of undying love. It was a secret that Huguet and Perrin shared, being Believers themselves.

'Indeed, my lady, Bertran is here. He told Perrin he could not wait to sing your mother, the Lady Clara, his latest song.'

'So is he staying long? Has he forsaken the court in Arles?'

Huguet's eyes turned vague, as if he were concentrating on a difficult key change. 'I think not. He spoke of other courts he must visit.'

'Must?' asked Elinor sharply. 'Is he so in love with the lady of every one that he must take his new song to them?'

Huguet cursed silently. He always forgot that, young as she was, Elinor was as sharp as a pin, particularly where Bertran de Miramont was concerned. He resolved to be more discreet in future.

He need not have worried. Elinor was entirely focused on the unfairness of being the daughter of the Lord, the *donzela* of the castle, who would never have a love song addressed to her. All the troubadours wrote songs of everlasting devotion to her mother, the *domna* of the castle; it simply wasn't the custom to serenade young unmarried women.

Everyone knew that neither Bertran nor any other troubadour was really in love with Lady Clara. Why, she was an old woman – over thirty years of age! But they had to pretend that they were and Lord Lanval understood this and didn't mind at all. He would have felt his hospitality insulted if a poet fed at his table had not sung the praises of his wife.

Bertran would not sing the song himself, of course; he was a nobleman in his own right, even if a poor one. It would be up to Perrin to sing it, accompanied by Huguet on the rebec. But Bertran would stand beside him, casting longing looks at Lady Clara and perhaps even sighing. And Elinor wanted him to sigh for her.

Bertran was over thirty too, but it was of no consequence in a man. He had no childbirths to slacken his figure or other womanly ailments to take the colour from his cheek or the vigour from his voice and sparkle from his eye. He was simply the handsomest man that Elinor had ever seen and she was so entranced by him that she wanted to *be* him almost as much as she wanted him to notice her and compose a poem to her beauty.

She smiled at the very thought and Huguet saw that the moment of danger had passed. The daughter of the castle was far too caught up in her own fancies to have noticed his slip about Bertran's movements.

'Out of the question,' said Lady Clara, when Elinor asked if she might be excused the dancing and yield her place to Alys.

She looked at her older daughter hard and what she saw pleased her no more than usual. It was difficult for a once beautiful woman to feel that she must soon yield her place to her daughters. Clara often wondered if it would be easier if Elinor were like her in any way but it was her younger daughter, Alys, who favoured her. Alys was naturally demure and never forgot to cast down her eyes when a male courtier or a knight passed her in the castle. She was fair-haired and grey-eyed like her mother, while Elinor was a sort of nut brown all over – hair, eyes and skin. It was in vain that her mother exhorted her to keep out of the sun; Elinor was outdoors on the castle walls in all weathers. But the rays that darkened her skin did nothing to lighten her hair.

She should have been a boy, thought Lady Clara, like Aimeric, who shared his sister's dark colouring. They were both like their father but it didn't matter in a son. Clara was happy to see Aimeric's complexion as a sign of manly hardiness. But girls should be fair and quiet and Elinor was not only dark but unruly and unladylike. If only she had been the younger daughter!

'You must dance, Elinor,' said her mother. 'Why else does your father feed and clothe a dancing instructor? And tonight

is your first opportunity to show how the *donzela* of the castle dances.'

'But, Maire,' said Elinor desperately, 'I am so very bad at it!'

'Then you must just practise until you are better,' said Lady Clara. 'Look – it's not difficult.'

She started to hum a vigorous tune and slid her feet sideways, before giving a neat little hop and skip.

'You see?' she said. 'Easy.'

'For you, Maire,' said Elinor, looking at her own feet. 'But the music goes so fast!'

'You must not look down, Elinor,' said Lady Clara. 'Just listen to the music, feel the beat of the tambour and let yourself be led. Close your eyes if it will help.'

It sounded pleasurable, even blissful, the way her mother described it, with her head thrown back and her eyes half-closed and her face all dreamy. But Elinor couldn't imagine doing it.

Still, she could see she wasn't going to get anywhere with her protests.

Lady Clara opened her eyes and looked into her daughter's wayward expression. Her own face softened.

'You have to try, Elinor,' she said, more kindly than usual. 'Dancing, singing, fine needlework, they all seem so hard to you, but what else can you do? You must have the accomplishments of a noblewoman if we are ever to find a husband for you. You will not get one on your looks alone.'

Elinor was glad of that 'alone'.

'I can read and write,' she said. 'And perhaps I do not have to marry?' (*If I cannot marry Bertran, the troubadour*, she added in her mind.)

'Out of the question,' said Lady Clara, her mood hardening again. 'You must marry. You cannot turn your skills with parchment and quills into land and rents, can you? You will have a husband, willing to pay a good bride price, if it's the last thing I do.'

Only you won't be the one that has to do it, thought Elinor bitterly.

The great hall was full of long wooden trestles and behind the one set at the head of the room green branches of fir, holly and hemlock hung from the beams. Perrin and Huguet and the other *joglar*s were already in place with their instruments, ready to play during dinner and for the dancing afterwards. They would not eat till all the guests had gone but there was already a flagon of wine at their feet, which would be refilled often during the evening.

Bertran would sit near the Lord's table, among Lanval's knights and foster-sons. They were beginning to drift into the great hall now. It wasn't until the musicians played a little fanfare that everyone took their place and stood for the entrance of the Lord and his family.

Lord Lanval, Lady Clara and their son Aimeric walked into the hall like the landed nobles they were, accustomed to deference from all the rest of the '*familha*' – the family – that made up the population of the castle. They were followed, for the first time at a saint's day feast, by the *donzela* of the castle, looking unusually demure, because her eyes were cast down towards her feet, something she did not usually manage.

But Elinor was terrified of all the gazes directed at her. As the family arrived at their places, she risked a swift upwards glance and saw Bertran smiling back at her encouragingly. She remembered just in time not to grin back at him – which would have counted as unladylike – but inclined her head so slowly that it could have counted as gracefully.

Then Perrin broke into a lively *virelai* on his lute and the moment passed. All during the meal Elinor felt her eyes darting back to where Bertran sat but he hardly ever looked at her again. If she was very careful, she could just sneak a glance now and again without her mother's notice. As well as the family there were some senior knights at their table, together with some lords and ladies from neighbouring towns, and a visitor Elinor had never seen before, who was engaged in courtly wordplay with her mother.

Elinor's feast partner was Aimeric, so after a while she relaxed. It would have been too awful to share dishes with a stranger. But her brother was not too daunting, at least when he wasn't teasing her.

'You look nice tonight, sister,' he said. 'That dress suits you.'

She was relieved; she had feared the rose velvet would make her look like something Hugo had concocted from berries and cream. And Aimeric had understood that she couldn't take any teasing tonight of all nights, on her first public appearance as *donzela*. But Elinor didn't want him to see her watching the troubadour.

Bertran was a fastidious eater, taking food from the shared dishes with his knife or a spoon and not using his fingers. He didn't wipe his hands on his bread trencher either, and when the savoury courses had been cleared away, he tore the gravy-

smeared bread into small pieces for the dogs, like a true nobleman and didn't wolf it down himself like a peasant.

All in all, the meal went better than Elinor had feared, though she was too nervous to do justice to Hugo's capon pasties or his roast venison and frumenty. But when all the many dishes had been cleared away, she was able to nibble at some gingerbread and almonds. And she drank gratefully of the spiced wine, which her father always served at the end of a feast.

And then Lanval and Clara were getting up and servants were coming in to move the tables away. That meant the dancing was about to begin and Elinor hastily gulped the last of her wine, her panic returning.

Before the dreaded *estampida*, there were jugglers and acrobats and even someone with a monkey that danced on its hind legs. But the moment couldn't be postponed for ever and at last Elinor heard the familiar rhythm being beaten out on the tambour. The *joglaresa*s – the female entertainers – were beginning to swish their skirts.

Noblemen and women assembled on what had been quickly transformed into a dance floor and Elinor soon found herself separated from Aimeric, who she had hoped would be her partner. Instead she was opposite Gui, one of her father's foster-sons, a *noiretz*. He was a good dancer, Elinor knew from her spying in the alcove, but not someone she wanted to see her awkward steps.

But the wine seemed to have done something strange to her feet as Perrin began to sing the opening verse of '*Kalenda Maia*' – the May Day song. It was not at all appropriate for the middle of winter but ever since Perrin had been taught it by an Italian troubadour it had been all the rage in Lanval's

court. It was a song written by a troubadour called Raimbaut to his lady love, Beatrice, the sister of his lord.

Everyone in the hall knew it and several joined in with the words.

'*Ma bell'amia*,' mouthed Gui. 'My beautiful friend.'

Elinor blushed; he nearly put her off her steps. But she made it to the end of the last verse: '*Bastida, Finida, N'Engles, ai l'estampida!*' which meant 'Enough, I've finished my composition, *Senhor* Engles, my *estampida*.'

Elinor wondered about *Senhor* Engles; perhaps he was a noble in Italy, at Monferrato, where Raimbaut had composed his song. She caught her breath, glad not to have made a fool of herself with Gui.

But the rest of the dancers were still moving and Huguet had launched into a lively *saltarello* on his fiddle. Elinor was appalled even though she had learned that it could follow straight on from the *estampida*. Her feet faltered because the music was much faster now and Gui's face was beginning to blur before her eyes in the spin and whirl of the dance. She was going to fall, on her first appearance as a grown-up woman in her father's court. And the young knights and *noiretz*s would laugh at her behind their hands. She wanted to die.

Then, miraculously, a face emerged from the blur and it was Bertran! His smile calmed her and although she was still scared, it was so lovely to be able to dance with him and clasp his hand as they crossed the set, that her feet forgot to be frightened and she understood what her mother meant about the music.

When the *saltarello* came to an end and Bertran lifted her by the waist, she let the moment last just a fraction longer for

the sake of feeling his arms around her.

'Forgive me, lady,' said Bertran, gently extricating himself. 'It is time for my new song.'

He stood by Perrin, who sang passionately to Lady Clara on Bertran's behalf. It was a strange new *canso*, more about war than love. Elinor scarcely took it in; she was still thinking of how it felt to be held by Bertran. But gradually her blood cooled and she paid more attention to the words he had written.

'*He who loves nobly seeks not to be cured of Love's ill, so sweet it is to suffer.*'

And her heart was pierced with such a pure pain to think that none of Bertran's songs were for her, or ever would be, that when she went to the bed she shared with Alys, she lay awake in the dark for hours weeping silently so as to keep her grief to herself.