

A Fall from Yesterday
The Standish Clan, #1
A Hearts of Harkness Novel
by
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Chapter 1

TITUS STANDISH heard the distinctive sound of his brother's approach before Scott had even turned his classic Triumph Bonneville off the main road and onto the long driveway to the Standish homestead. Normally that sound would lighten his heart. A visit from his footloose sibling was a rare and welcome thing. But this time, an uneasy dread pervaded his gut, overshadowing the gladness.

Dredging up a wide smile, he descended the porch steps. Scott killed the bike's engine, deployed the kickstand and climbed off. He'd removed his helmet and stowed it on the back of the bike by the time Titus reached him.

"Christ, look at you." Titus embraced his leather-clad brother and clapped him on the back. "You're as bow-legged as old Vince Buchanan."

Scott returned the hug/back slap, then pulled away. "Hey, you try riding ten hours and see how you walk afterward."

"Long drive," Titus conceded. "Where were you coming from this time?"

"Montreal."

"Still?" He raised an eyebrow. "That's been a long stretch in one place. Thinking about settling down?"

"Nah. Just a long job, is all."

"Will you be going back after the weekend?"

Something that looked like regret flashed in Scott's eyes, but it was gone before Titus could analyze it.

"Briefly. Job's almost done."

"Right." Titus nodded, then looked at his watch. "Montreal, huh? You must have got an early start. I didn't expect you until closer to supper."

"Saw there was some rain in the forecast and wanted to beat it, so I set out at four a.m."

"Don't blame you. 'Course, I think you're crazy for driving that thing this late in the season anyway. I can't believe your teeth aren't rattling."

"Just have to dress for it."

Titus rolled his eyes.

“But you’re right,” Scott said, “Season’s pretty much done, even for me. I was hoping you’d store this girl for me over the winter.”

Well, that was definitely going to be a problem, which Scott would discover soon enough. And when he did, finding someone else to store his bike for him was going to be the least of his concerns.

Titus cleared his throat. “Flying back to Montreal?”

“Yeah. I can rent a car for the few days I’ll be there, and I’ll just buy new wheels when I get to the next stop.”

Scott’s “new wheels” tended to be anything but. His last purchase was a 2002 Taurus, which he’d sold when he left Saskatoon. “So, where’s the next stop?”

Scott shrugged. “I’ve got a buddy in Alberta. We’re talking about a construction project.”

“This time of year? Southern Alberta, I hope.”

“Northern, actually. But if it’s a go, it’ll be constructing modular housing units indoors, not freezing our asses off on scaffolding at forty below. It’s still up in the air. But if not that, there’ll be something.”

There always was.

Titus felt that familiar surge of envy start to rise, but quashed it quickly. He was soon going to be free too. Free to finally leave the farm behind and follow his own dream, one he’d cherished since he was boy.

“Whoa, that’s new, isn’t it?” Scott gestured to Titus’s Ford F250 Super Duty.

The last time Scott had been in Harkness, Titus had been driving a nine-year-old truck. It was still in good shape. Good enough that he’d hung onto it. But it was a pale shadow of the new F250. This baby had enough horsepower to tow damn near anything. It could also go just about anywhere. When he was behind the wheel, he felt like he was ready for whatever nature could throw at him.

“Yep. I’ve had it about nine months now.”

“Sold the old one, I imagine?”

He shook his head. “Nah. For all I’d get out of it, I figured we’d be further ahead to keep it as a backup, in case anything happens to Arden’s vehicle.”

Scott nodded. “Probably best.”

“I gotta say, I’m really loving the electronic locking rear differential on the new one.”

“No slithering around in mud or fishtailing in loose gravel?”

“Or snow.”

“Sweet.” Scott stepped back for a better look. “Power takeoff?”

“Of course.”

“I think I read about that. Split shaft capability so you can run two accessories at once, right?”

“That’s the idea. Not that I ever have.”

Scott grinned. “But the point is you *could*.”

His brother circled the truck and Titus couldn’t help but grin too. Scott was twenty-eight—just four years younger than Titus—but he looked like a kid in a candy shop as he checked out every gleaming inch of the truck, including the tires, the tarp-covered box, the interior of the SuperCab. He even took a quick look under the hood.

“Special order?”

Titus nodded, dropping the hood.

Scott let out a low, appreciative whistle. “Has Ember seen it?”

Titus laughed, both at Scott’s enthusiasm for the truck and his assumption that their sister would be even close to excited about it. “Yeah she’s seen it. But you know Red. She doesn’t share our appreciation for the finer things in life.”

“*Red*?” Scott slanted him a look. “Living a little dangerously, aren’t you?”

“Not if you don’t tell her.” Their fiery sister with the flaming red hair most definitely did *not* appreciate that nickname.

Scott chuckled.

On that exchange, Titus let himself take an easy breath. The first real one since Scott had roared into the yard.

“Where’s Ember?” Scott said. “I thought she’d have landed already.”

“She did. Got here yesterday. But Dad sent her on an errand to town.”

“And where’s Uncle Arden?”

Still with the Uncle Arden. Strictly speaking, Scott was Titus’s cousin, not his brother. Arden’s nephew. When his parents had been killed in a car accident in Minnesota, ten-year-old Scott had come to live with the Harkness branch of the family in northern New Brunswick. Arden and Margaret had wasted no time adopting him, and while he’d eventually come to call

Margaret Standish “Mom,” it had always been Uncle Arden.

Titus nodded toward the Far South Barn, the one they’d used for the Halloween parties and the Christmas dances. Even a few wedding receptions over the years. “Said he had something to do in the barn.”

They both stared toward the old structure, and Titus wondered what Scott was thinking.

This Thanksgiving weekend was the first time that the four of them—all that was left of the Harkness clan—would be together since Scott briefly blew into town for all of thirty-six hours last Christmas. Prior to that, it had been a full two years since they’d all sat around the table, each of them sliding into their accustomed seat, leaving the chair to their father’s right conspicuously empty.

In the last ten years, Scott had been all over hell and creation. North of Fort McMurray, Alberta. Timmons, Ontario. He’d spent one winter in the Florida Keys, and he’d taken jobs as far west as Victoria and as far east as the oil rigs off the coast of Newfoundland. And most recently, Montreal.

Scott had taken off shortly after their mother fell sick again, right after high school graduation. Ember had graduated that same year and left Harkness too, but for different reasons. They’d still been kids, really. But old enough.

Titus had been thoroughly pissed about Scott’s cut-and-run attitude. Arden had been more understanding, though. He’d helped Titus to see how doubly devastating their mother’s cancer recurrence was for Scott, who’d had to bear the loss of one mother already, and just couldn’t bear to watch his second mother waste away. To his credit, Scott had called every week, bringing a smile to Margaret Standish’s face no matter how much pain she was suffering.

Titus hadn’t begrudged Ember’s leaving like he had Scott’s defection. She’d been running away too, though not from their mother’s illness. Maybe that’s why he’d found her departure easier to accept. She’d also been running *toward* something worthwhile—a medical degree. Their parents had been so proud when she was accepted into pre-med. Their mother wouldn’t have let anything get in the way of Ember becoming a doctor.

Meanwhile, Titus had been stuck home on the farm. Taking care of things. Responsible for it all.

It wasn’t supposed to have been like this. A year. Titus was going to delay his departure for one year. The doctors gave Margaret six months to live. Titus was the eldest son; he accepted

that the responsibility to stay should fall to him. And what was a year?

Margaret Standish lasted for two years, during which Titus took over almost complete responsibility for the farm. All that while, Arden had been her primary caregiver, with a little help from Titus, and as she became more critical, the extra-mural nursing program. They were thankful for every day they had with her, even the hard ones. But when she had finally died, Titus's burden hadn't eased. Not for many months. Worn out from the intensive months of round-the-clock care, his father had slipped into bottomless, crippling grief.

So crippling it had even crippled Titus.

Crippled his dreams anyway.

But that was going to change. That was why Titus had called his siblings home.

Dammit. There went that easy breath again.

A gust of cold October wind rattled through the trees lining the driveway, releasing a new shower of yellow and red leaves. Titus's gaze followed their fluttering path toward the front lawn, where they landed in front of the house. The house itself with its white clapboards gleamed dazzlingly in the sunlight.

Titus had been outside on the veranda when his father emerged earlier. When their eyes met, the old man had steeled away that look of regret and summoned an approving nod. He'd said he needed something from the Far South Barn. Titus had offered to fetch whatever it was he wanted, but his father had waved him off. So Titus had been left to watch him descend the steps with his stiff, arthritic gait, and cross the expanse of browning grass to the barn. Possibly for the last time.

They were selling the place. That's why he'd insisted Ember and Scott come home for Thanksgiving. He was going to tell them this weekend when they were all together again, the last family gathering at the Standish homestead. One last Thanksgiving meal together.

"There she is!" Scott turned toward the road, a wide grin spreading across his face.

Unlike Scott's motorcycle, Titus hadn't tuned in to the approach of his father's old Jeep.

Ember swung into the driveway and beeped the horn twice when she saw them.

Seconds later, she brought the old vehicle to a halt beside the truck. As soon as the wheels stopped rolling, she jumped out and ran over to Scott. She leapt into his arms, clinging to his neck and laughing as he twirled her around. Scott was laughing himself when he set her down on the ground. But Ember grabbed him for one more squeeze.

Titus smiled knowingly. *Three, two, one, and...*

Ember took the first shot. "So, still riding around on that cute little moped of yours, I see."

"Moped?" Scott feigned annoyance. "I think all that med school mumbo-jumbo has melted your brain. That's an exquisitely restored 1980 Triumph Bonneville."

"Oh, is that what the kids are calling them now?"

Titus laughed out loud as little sister slammed Scott right back. And again.

Then once more after that.

It was bittersweet, the three of them together again. Laughing, joking around in the yard just like old times.

Titus gazed across the Standish land. The barns, the fields. In the distance, Harkness Mountain. The marker of memories for so many in this town. Few darker than Titus's own.

"So now that Ember's here, I can ask," Scott said. "What's the deal, Titus? Why'd you call us home?"

Titus's attention snapped back to his siblings.

"Yeah," Ember tucked a stray strand of hair behind an ear only to have the wind tug it free again. "What's this all about?"

He was about to blurt it out when he saw their silver-haired father step through the doors of the barn and start walking toward them. Arden Standish gave a little wave and a smile.

"After we've eaten," Titus found himself saying. "I'll tell you then."

There. That would give them all one peaceful meal together before he dropped the bomb. And drop it he would. Arden had promised to let him be the one to break the news. It was up to Titus to explain things, since Arden had only done it for Titus. Yes, Arden had made the offer to sell the place and go into a seniors' apartment in town, but he probably hadn't counted on Titus taking him up on it.

He'd made the offer last year too, but Titus didn't figure his still-grieving father was in any shape to make that decision. Besides, the idea was inconceivable. Sell the farm?

But the idea had taken hold, coming back to torture Titus long after he'd dismissed it out of hand. He'd beaten it back by reminding himself that he was over thirty. Since it was too late in life to train for a career in policing, what did it matter? What was he going to do? Move to Fredericton and sell farm equipment? Then he'd stumbled on an article about how eager the RCMP were for mature candidates. That chance article had set him on a new path. He'd applied;

they wanted him.

When Arden made his offer again, Titus had jumped on it.

To say Arden had been stunned was an understatement. But he'd recovered quickly, no doubt buoyed at the knowledge of how long it would surely take to find a buyer. But Titus had had an offer in hand before he and Arden had even sat down. True to his word, Arden had signed the Agreement for Purchase and Sale. The closing was set for Tuesday of next week, but they had until the end of the month to vacate.

"Guess I can live with that," Scott said. "I'm starving."

Titus glanced at Ember. "What about you, Sis?"

"Depends. You making grilled cheese?"

Titus grinned. "Could do."

"Okay, then." Ember took a step forward, her gaze fixed on their approaching father. "What's Dad got?" She looked up at Titus. "Is that Mom's old music book?"

It was. The book of songs she'd played on the old upright piano at every Christmas party. Right up until her death.

They were silent for a moment.

Finally, Ember cleared her throat. "I'll go in and get some coffee on." She zipped back to the Jeep, grabbed the distinct white and blue bag from Parker & Ward's Pharmacy from the passenger seat, and strode toward the house.

Scott slapped Titus on the shoulder. "You go on ahead and get those grilled cheese sandwiches started. I'll say hi to Uncle Arden and we'll be along in a minute."

"Sounds like a plan." Titus headed inside, giving his father the slightest shake of the head as they passed. Arden nodded. Message received. They didn't know yet.

But they would. Soon. And if they didn't freak out about the sale of the homestead, they certainly would when they heard who the buyer was.

Titus was finally going to be free, but he might just have made a deal with the devil to buy that freedom.

Chapter 2

OCEAN SILIKER stopped, but not because she was winded. Yasmine Trail was a cake walk compared to the route she was heading for. She'd stopped because she thought she'd found the shortcut.

Using the toe of her hiking boot, she scuffed dirt off the metal marker plate at her feet. Then, drawing a fortifying breath, she bent and wiped the small plate clean.

Yes!

She was there, at Marker 32. The unmapped, unofficial, many-have-done-it shortcut to Angel Trail. The most challenging trail on Harkness Mountain. But it was also the quickest route to where she wanted to go.

She looked into the thicket of pines to her left beyond the trail's edges, silently daring her to step into its shadowy embrace.

She checked her watch—*almost noon*—and looked up into the piercingly blue fall sky. It couldn't be a more beautiful day on the mountain. The breeze was gentle up here. The air had that perfect autumn crispness to it. But Ocean knew that perfection would shift all too quickly as the sun overhead moved further west.

She bit her lip.

There were risks to the shortcut. For one, the off-trail terrain was a harder slog. Colder too. Once she was engulfed by the trees and lost the sun altogether, the temperature would drop. She zipped her warm jacket the last inch to her chin. Of course the biggest risk was getting lost. Even a few people from Harkness itself had gotten turned around up here.

Alternatively, she could follow Yasmine to where it intersected High Trail, hang a left, and make her way over to Angel. Except that route would take her way out of the way before it connected with High and she could finally double back. That would take forever.

Meanwhile, the point where she stood right now—Marker 32—marked the closest point between Yasmine and Angel.

She could always wait until spring. Strike out earlier, and plan things better. And, for the love of Pete, *at least tell someone that she was up here*. She'd tried phoning her mother from the base

of the mountain, but couldn't get a signal. Clearly, she was too far from a communications tower. Or maybe the nearest tower was on the other side of the mountain.

She drew another deep breath and expelled it slowly. Admittedly, she'd planned this trek pretty hastily, but she had dressed properly in layers of clothing, starting with thermal underwear and ending with a warm wind-proof bomber jacket. She'd also worn a good wind-proof, breathable hat and warm gloves. She'd packed the basics too: lots of energy bars and a couple of one liter bottles of water. She'd also tucked an old mountain map into her backpack somewhere. A bunch of other papers filled out the bag's side, but they were less useful. To anyone.

So, go on or go back?

She should have left much earlier in the day, to maximize the available light. Turning back would be the sensible thing to do.

Except it would also mean giving up. Failing.

Again.

She'd go on to White Crow Cliff, but she'd be careful. She would head straight into the forest at right angles and go straight through to Angel Trail. Just a half-mile. Four times around the track out back of Harkness High. She would go slowly, methodically. And she'd get there. No matter what.

Because she was doing it for both of them.

And because she could almost hear that giggling whisper of memory—Lacey Douglas's voice in her ear. *I dare you.*

She squared her shoulders, pulled in a deep breath, and stepped off the well-groomed trail.

Just as she'd anticipated, she felt the temperature difference immediately. Her first instinct was to pick up her pace, get her heart working harder and her blood circulating, but she resisted the urge. She needed to move quickly, but she would use caution, noting landmarks and keep looking back at them for frame of reference, to ensure she kept on the correct course, perpendicular to Yasmine. Sooner or later, she had to emerge on Angel, if she stayed on course.

Then her phone rang, startlingly loud in the undergrowth. A crow lifted off a high branch, cawing as it flew away. She fumbled for her pocket, pulling the phone out and answering it on the third ring.

“Ocean?”

Her mother. Good. Now she could remedy her ill-judged failure to report her whereabouts and

her intended route.

“Hi, Mom. I can’t believe you got through! I’m on Harkness Mountain and I haven’t been able to get a signal since I left the parking lot.”

“Ocean?”

“Mom, can you hear me?”

“Sweetheart, can you hear me?”

“Yes, I can hear you. I’m on Harkness Mountain, but don’t worry about me. I’m just making my way to Angel Trail. I’m going up as far as White Crow Cliff.” Her mother didn’t need to know she was planning to *climb* White Crow. “So don’t worry about me, okay? I know what I’m doing.”

“Ocean? Darling, are you there? I can’t hear you, but I hope you can hear me. I think you’re on the mountain, so just—”

Silence.

“Mom? Mom?”

Nothing but dead air.

She tried dialing her mother’s number, but there was no reception. Dammit! Her mother would be so worried. Maybe if she backtracked, she’d get a signal again. She retraced her steps. Nothing. She climbed higher, then higher still, then circled around, trying her phone again and again.

Finally she had to concede that she wasn’t going to get a signal.

And she had to concede something else. She’d lost track of her last-noted landmark.

